

OF PRESSURE, PASSIONS, AND ADVENTUROUS OFFENSIVES: IRAQ THROUGH AN ALTERNATE LENS

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**OF PRESSURE, PASSIONS, AND ADVENTUROUS OFFENSIVES:
IRAQ THROUGH AN ALTERNATE LENS**

by

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ABSTRACT

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The U.S. invasion of Iraq within the context of the Global War on Terrorism is, arguably, an “adventurous offensive.” Remarkable similarities exist between the strategic environment in the lead up to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and what may be defined as another adventurous offensive; the Athenian expedition to Sicily over two millennia ago. This project examines the U.S. decision to invade Iraq against the historical backdrop of the Athenian expedition to Sicily in 415 B.C. Research reveals how cultural identity and by extension the world view of policymakers can influence strategic perspectives and decisions and lead to military operations incongruent with policy aims. Research also reveals how history can serve as a viable aid in understanding the strategic environment and logic behind strategic decisions.

This paper will examine the logic that led the U.S. to invade Iraq through the historical background of an Athenian expedition to Sicily in 415 B.C. and will conclude with several broad strategic lessons that might be of benefit to modern policymakers and strategists.

OF PRESSURE, PASSIONS, AND ADVENTUROUS OFFENSIVES: IRAQ THROUGH AN ALTERNATE LENS

Remarkable similarities exist between the strategic environment leading up to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Athenian expedition to Sicily over two millennia ago. The aim of Athens' expeditions to Sicily in 415 B.C., as recorded by Thucydides, "[was] to assist the allies of Egesta and Leontini and order Sicilian affairs to suit Athens' interests."¹ Succinctly, and within the context of the greater Peloponnesian War, Athens sought to keep the pressure on its Spartan rival in a "long war" for cultural supremacy. By 414 B.C. the expedition had fallen largely into disarray. Any hope of salvaging what arguably from the start was an adventurous commitment of military power faded in the shadows of Syracusan defenses and amidst disjointed and ultimately ineffective Athenian tactics. The Athenian expedition to Sicily, as described by Donald Kagan, "was an undertaking whose purpose and feasibility remain controversial, and which ended in defeat and different degrees of disaster."² The strategic environment in which the expedition took place, characterized explicitly as the collision of the identity of Athenian strategic culture with that of Sparta, offers a myriad of lessons to modern policymakers and strategists.

Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War – the wider conflict in which the Athenian expedition to Sicily occurred—gives readers an appreciation for the exceptionally violent and destructive struggle taking place between the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta. Ironically, merely a half century prior these powers aligned in an all out bid to defend the Greek world against Persian aggression.

Of the two powers Athens has the greater aspiration for leadership, security and prosperity. Athenian society believes itself to be culturally advanced and it is from this belief that it finds impetus for what it deems as its rightful role as leader of the Greek world. In the wake of a successful alliance to free Greeks of Persian influence Athens likely did not expect to confront increasingly greater demands and sacrifices. Indeed the sense of superior identity Athens possesses and the pressures that identity places on its political leaders manifests in flawed strategic decisions and ultimately an all out struggle for survival.

Of Pressures and Policymakers

Kagan notes that beyond a shared ethnicity, Athens and Sparta have little in common. As influential states vying for power and security within the Aegean region, Athens and Sparta were “as different as any two in the Greek world.”³ In Athenian and Spartan societies rested distinct institutions and values from which the two states draw their identity, discern interests and find inspiration for war.

In his anthropological study of man's interaction with his fellow man Dr. M.E. Vlahos hypothesizes that war is a traditional formula for societal change. He likens war to a “religious ritual” whose complexity, uncertainty and volatility permits societies to realize either a new identity or to celebrate an identity in need of renewal. Vlahos contends that war, as an almost ritualistic phenomenon, can serve as a means to further the narrative of a culture, or promote the continuation of a culture's story of sacrifice and ability to rise above others also competing for survival.⁴

What could reasonably be assumed from Dr. Vlahos' work is that cultural identity and by extension the emphasis which is placed on continuing the cultural narrative can

direct policymakers toward unbounded commitment, ambition and willingness to sacrifice. The study of war indeed reveals how strategy, while influenced by cultural identity can narrow the perspectives of policymakers and cause them to become blind to the limitations of military power. In cases where a form of strategic blindness exists in policymakers the outcome of the strategy, regardless of battles won, has proven deleterious to the state and its policymakers; Hitler's leadership of Nazi Germany during World War II provides an example.

Presumably counterbalancing passion generated by cultural identity is human rationality, defined as "the latent or active power to make logical inferences and draw conclusions that enable one to understand the world about him and relate such knowledge to the attainment of ends."⁵ Anthropologists and students of ethno-history argue that rationality is normally identified through a society's cultural norms and standards. Generally accepted rules and guidelines for behavior presumably extend to the highest reaches of government where interests of a state are recorded and where the ends, ways and means to secure those interests are decided. These rules and guidelines, theorists argue, are principally what influence the sacrifice and commitment of a society in war. Yet historical examples indicate that this is not always the case.

Clausewitz assumed rationality to be an intrinsic aspect of policy and strategic decision-making. Nested in his arguments *ad hominem* is the assertion that the influence of human nature on policy is inevitable. Of course within this assertion one must include man's intellectual and emotional shortcomings. Clausewitz makes note of man's immutable nature, to include his fallibility, and the influence it can have on strategy. He also cautions against disregarding man's influence because of his fallibility

and regardless of the added complexity it introduces to calculating war's ends, ways and means.⁶

Though crediting Clausewitz's idea as logical, Michael Handel contends that such an assertion underestimates the weight of human fallibility and its influence on matters of policy and strategy. Handel claims that policy, or what Clausewitz referred to as "the pursuit of the collective interests of the state," is not always rooted in rational thought. Handel argues that, "[Clausewitz] should have known from the leadership of Napoleon, the objectives and strategic decisions of such leaders are not necessarily rational and may often be intended to fulfill their personal or dynastic ambitions, not to promote the interests of the state."⁷

It is reasonable to suggest that the personal interest policymakers have in possessing and wielding power may on occasion outweigh their interest in using that power for the betterment of the state. In effect, a belief in the corrupting nature of power extends to the realm of strategic decision-making and to the view that a society may have of its existence amongst other societies. Arguably, policymakers in particular, as the result of their responsibility for developing strategy, encounter a kind of inner tension that emerges from situations where the strategy for which they are responsible leads into a crisis. The convulsive reactions to crises to which policymakers are arguably susceptible stem from what Alberto Coll describes as "a broader notion of necessity."⁸ What is often admired in political leaders as a penchant for action has the potential, under the pressure of the passions of war, to become a self-imposed obligation to forcefully resolve issues that may have grave strategic consequence. The resulting choices for precipitous action may bring greater harm to states interests.

History's accounts of political leaders that have displayed unpredictable and irrational behavior in crisis support such a notion. Indeed, political leaders are always subject to the risk of making irrational choices amidst the demands and heightened passions of war. A real or perceived growth in the severity of a crisis arguably would increase or accelerate a decay of reason, including a sense of diminishing control, often powerlessness, and a heightened perception of uncertainty. Bearing the weight of the hopes, fears and aspirations of a society, such a decay of reason can compel decisions that verge on the irrational, yet perhaps ironically appear logical in the mind of the decision maker simply because recommended courses of action appears to align with their culture's identity.

Alberto Coll in his comments on the social dimension of war states that the decay in reason can make the rational calculus of war more difficult. The skewed strategic logic that stems from this harmful condition, Coll asserts, "Can lead to unsound decisions by political leaders that expose the state to greater strategic complications and make sound strategy and war termination even more elusive."⁹ Such behavior may have other deleterious effects as well, including the suppression of questions about possible consequences of a decision and its impact on long term policy aims. Moreover, this kind of behavior may cause political leaders to shift the policy objectives upon which the original strategy was founded to the periphery, replacing them with the pursuit of others outside the original strategic aim.

Categorically, "adventurous offensives" are the pursuit of military objectives that lack coherent linkage to the strategic aim. Such offensives are often the byproduct of a strategy where increasing difficulty is encountered in coordinating and applying

elements of national power, particularly military power, to achieve the desired policy goal. These offensives entail the costly, extended, and often fruitless expenditure of national resources. The increasing socio-economic demand placed on a state and a kind of moral dislocation resulting from the realization of an ineffective strategy is sufficient to perpetuate unsound strategic decisions by policymakers. Left hanging precariously in the balance is the security of a state's territory and citizens, its economic well-being, and continuation of a state's cultural status and values.

The Restlessness of Athens

In the closing decades of the 5th century B.C. the Greek city-state of Athens is the most culturally and economically advanced state in the Aegean region. Dominate within Athens is a sense of cultural superiority based upon its open system of government and maritime tradition; the latter arguably influencing every aspect of Athenian life and a fundamental driver of how Athenians view the world and their place in it. Athenian culture is inextricably linked to the sea as the result of its geographic position and economic priorities resting upon commerce and empire.

The Athenian navy, including a commercial fleet and more than 300 warships is by all measures the largest, best trained and most expensive naval force in the Greek world.¹⁰ The trireme, Athens' principal means for engaging allies and subjects and providing for their security is a vessel whose advanced construction and maneuverability is offset only by the difficulties of sustainment during extended periods at sea.¹¹

Athens' maritime culture and its heavy reliance on open and secure maritime trade routes is to an extent a disadvantage. Athens' requirement to maintain key sea

lines of communication (SLOC) and to control states astride those lines is vital to its existence. Resources of grain and timber lie to the north in the modern region of the Dardanelles and Ukraine. Procuring these resources places constant demand on the Athenian navy, yet the way of life exemplified in the navy's ability to "put to sea" and influence the region is both a point of pride for Athens and a message to its rivals of its ambition, credibility and belief in the elevated status of Athenian culture.

The city-state of Sparta, Athens' chief rival, maintains the Peloponnesian League, a loose confederation of states and an appendage of a former Greek effort to repel invasion by the Persian Empire. Sparta's government lends itself to a dictatorship of hereditary rule in which centralized decision-making tends to prevail over open political discourse and innovation.¹² Sparta is by all accounts a significant land power as evidenced by its highly trained and equipped army. The supreme importance Spartan leaders place on the army encourages a societal practice of eugenics, or control of the quality of Spartan offspring, including the killing of Spartan youth possessing psychological and physiological defects.¹³

As a land power, Sparta relies heavily on the navies of allies to compete in the maritime arena. Its economy in comparison with that of Athens' is weaker and more heavily dependent upon slaves; Sparta's chief source of manpower and an institution which frees Spartan men to fight. Because of its slave-based economy and helot slaves significantly outnumbering the citizens of Sparta by a seven to one margin, Spartan policymakers must deal consistently and often firmly with its slave population, including suppressing slave uprisings.¹⁴ Sparta's land-centric culture and heavy domestic agenda manifests in a foreign policy much less adventuresome than Athens'.

Genesis of a Strategic Dilemma

Athens' foreign policy in the wake of its successful war against Persia is marked by increasing self-interest. In the decades leading up to 415 B.C. Athenian leadership of the Delian League, begun as a voluntary alliance of Greek states to counter Persian aggression and later evolving as the economic and organizational framework for Athenian power, becomes increasingly provocative.¹⁵ Under the direction of Pericles, Athens' leading statesman, interventions into affairs of Spartan allies are common and carried out under the guise of increased security for the Athenian homeland.

Ever more apparent to allies within the Delian League is the secondary importance Athens places in the collective interests of its alliances. Athens' communications, much like its application of military power, takes on an increasingly directive tone and reflects a growing impatience over having to administer to weaker allies having influence on Athenian affairs.

Paralleling the increased ambition Athens is displaying is a developing security-power dilemma. An alarming growth in Athenian power and influence characterizes this dilemma and has a destabilizing effect in the Aegean region, never more apparent than in the increased fear and insecurity sensed by Sparta and its allies. Athens' behavior, in the eyes of Spartan politicians and generals, reflects an alarming degree of unpredictability.

Sparta is driven to war over its concern for the growth in Athenian power and influence, its credibility with its allies and reputation as a power center in the Greek world. The rising power of Athens and the inevitable decline of Sparta, as Thucydides instructs his readers, rest upon perception. These perceptions are in some ways

misleading; they offer politicians and generals an appreciation for the role of irrationality in relationships between states.¹⁶

Athens' Strategic Dilemma and the Interplay of Cultural Identity

If the weighty responsibility for policy and strategy places enormous pressures on political leaders, it can be logically concluded that strategic situations offering little or no favorable recourse will only serve to heighten that pressure. Such was the case for Athenian policymakers in 415 B.C. on the eve of their decision to invade Sicily. However, to conclude that Athens' decision to embark upon a second expedition to Sicily is a response to its strategic dilemma is to miss the complex circumstances influencing that decision.

Indeed in 415 B.C Athens faced a strategic dilemma manifested by its inability to strike a decisive blow against Sparta. The causes of this dilemma can be traced to Athenian grand strategy and to the popular pressures upon its political leaders resulting from frustration with that strategy. Driving the Athenians' desire for aggrandizement is an appreciation of and, it is reasonable to assert, fear for the power of Sparta. To enable Athens to best apply its strengths in the war, its leading statesman and strategist Pericles outlines the following course of action: first, Athens must refrain from further expansion and defend only those colonial holdings and key maritime lines of communication sustaining the empire's prosperity and prestige; second, Athenian citizens must be secured behind Athens' long protective walls in order to deny Sparta battle on land where its greatest potential for victory exists; and finally, and as an adjunct to its maritime operations Athens must conduct raids from the sea where its

greatest strength resides to threaten Sparta's interests and erode its will to continue the war.¹⁷

Perhaps analogous to the disease called glaucoma where one's eyesight progressively deteriorates as the result of a buildup of pressure, the strategic perspective held by Athenian political leaders suffer from a progressive narrowing of the strategic environment. By the end of Athens' first year of war social and economic fatigue is pervasive, the result of a defensive strategy whose deficiencies undermine achievement of its stated strategic objectives. Questions become increasingly common in Athens over the war's legitimacy and the degree of threat posed by its purported enemies. Although invasion of the Athenian homeland by Spartan soldiers fails to bring about the swift and decisive victory intended by Sparta, the indignities incurred by Athenians who must watch their homes and crops destroyed achieves the desired effect of producing low morale, economic fatigue and increased uncertainty about the future.

Pericles' continued support for his failing strategy reflects a kind of strategic naiveté. His defense of a strategy based upon flawed assumptions and playing to its own strengths while flouting the enemy's indicates a lack of understanding for the finiteness of military power and consideration for the unexpected.¹⁸ Growing concern in Athens over the war's cost in both lives and treasure parallels a realization that insufficient force can be mustered to deter Spartan aggression. The enduring spirit and durability Pericles assumes will be a byproduct of the Athenian strategy is in contrast being smothered by the war's immutable destructiveness.

Pericles possesses the leadership assets to assist Athens in shouldering the burden of discouraging circumstances.¹⁹ The great affection Pericles receives from the

population of Athens is matched only by the feelings he has for the city. But Periclean strategy rests upon a dangerous misunderstanding of the power necessary to bring about a successful conclusion to the war. Pericles skillfully manipulates the Athenian assembly, even to the point of preventing its meetings, in an effort to quell and mitigate the risk of citizens becoming overcome with anger and going beyond the walls to defend their homes.²⁰ Seemingly oblivious to Athens' strategic shortcomings and while appreciating the potential of his society's passion, Pericles calls upon his prestige as Athens' leading statesman and his talents in public oration to steel his electorate for an uncertain future.

Described by Kagan as "the most glorious and attractive picture modern day readers have of the character of the Athenian democracy and its superiority to the Spartan way of life," Pericles' funeral oration is a manifestation of a compelling need to rally a population beset by the hardships of war.²¹ In contrast to the leadership of Nicias and Alcibiades, who would later emerge onto the stage of Athenian politics, Pericles' leadership is altruistic and born of a deep affection for Athens. But Pericles' leadership is no less harmful due its short sightedness and the degree of irrationality involved in estimating the costs of the war.

Pericles' proclamation that the war no longer was about honoring commitments to coalitions, but Athenian credibility and the security of the Athenian homeland, is evidence of a mounting frustration and concern over the course of the war. His appeal to the electorate in an oration honoring the sacrifices of fallen soldiers is evidence of the pressures mounting on him and the growing passion of a concerned population. His conviction for continuing the strategy is so strong that he beseeches the assembly to

remain committed to its tenets, asserting that only victory could validate the sacrifices made up to that point.

In successfully convincing Athens to continue with the strategy Pericles re-affirms the ends, ways and means with which the war with Sparta will be fought.²² However, he would not live to see the outcome of his strategy. Not long after his oration the plague beleaguering Athens in 430 B.C. would claim his life along with over a quarter of the city's population. Left in the wake was a socio-economic and political environment frayed by war and disease.²³ Yet the environment was ripe for the imagination of new leaders consonant with Athens' cultural identity. In concert with its nature Athens believed this to mean activities seeking increased wealth and prestige for the empire.

Heading a list of the demands war places on Athens and Sparta and its toll on their populations is concern over sons lost as prisoners to the war. For Sparta in particular, this concern results in a resurgence of diplomacy over what are invaluable soldiers and relatives of Spartan families and serves as the impetus for a settlement.²⁴ Lost on Athens is what should be the greatest purpose for peace, which Clausewitz identifies as the improbability of victory and unacceptably high costs.²⁵

A reprieve from war's smothering effect imbues in Athens a renewed sense of energy. Peace allows Athens to resume its pursuit of traditional as well as new commercial interests. Athens' treasuries are replenished and a transformed sense of optimism takes hold of the population. Athenian confidence is also bolstered through a string of naval victories that serve to re-affirm Athens' long-held belief in its dominance of the sea. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, peace also allows the rise of a new generation of overly ambitious leaders.

Disagreements over provisions of the peace accord occur almost immediately and serve to rejuvenate long held suspicions. The effect of this distrust between Athens and Sparta is exacerbated by non-compliant allies driven by their own interests and fears. However, peace offers some benefit, and from what is roughly a six-year respite come renewed inspiration and strategic thinking in Athens.

Athens experiences a renewed desire to free itself from a stymied political and economic position within the Greek world, an indicator, according to Vlahos, of a society's commitment to continuing its cultural narrative. Such renewed energy could have prompted a re-assessment of the current strategy. However, the potential and benefit of such a reassessment is lost amidst the confusion, uncertainty and frustration that pervaded Athens in 416 B.C. Thucydides suggests that coupled with Athens' flawed strategy, issues were complicated by the intrinsic weaknesses of man when faced by complex strategic decisions.

The weariness that pervades the city in 416/15 B.C. is not lost on the new leaders Nicias and Alcibiades. Nicias, the more mature, pious and capable of the two leaders, is a respected protégé of the late Pericles. The support Nicias has for the strategy devised by his mentor is underscored by his confidence that it can still promote the prosperity of the empire and convey the empire's permanence and immunity to coercion and destruction.²⁶ Alcibiades, Nicias' political rival, is a young, daring and ambitious political figure eager for greater political status and accolades associated with the status of an Athenian general. He has in mind the goal of subduing Sparta through the help of a "great Peloponnesian alliance."²⁷ The common denominator between these two, notwithstanding the moderate political stance held by the former and strong

sense of ambition in the latter, is their susceptibility to a strategic blindness similar to that contracted by Pericles.

By 416 B.C. the heightened dissatisfaction and alarm in Athens resulting from its un-resolvable strategic dilemma is aggravated by Sparta's failure to adhere to the peace. Sparta's coalition with smaller states raises alarm that the balance of power may be shifting to Sparta. Such an imbalance, when viewed in the context of Athens' strategic dilemma, could be likened to pressure that builds beneath the earth's tectonic plates and releases in a violent manner once it has achieved enough force to overcome barriers normally keeping it in check.

The kind of volatility or heightened aggressiveness a culture can take on is exemplified in Athens' action in light of its uncertainty over the next and most effective step in its strategy. Indeed in 416 B.C. Athens felt a compelling need to act, if for no other reason than because the power to act was present in its navy, an element of national power that had served it well in the past and held out the promise of reasserting Athenian power and prestige.

The Pressure of a Broader Notion of Necessity

The Athenian expedition to Melos in 415 B.C arguably signaled to Athens a window of opportunity to reassert its influence. According to Thucydides, Athens' interests in Melos extend back to 432 B.C. and the Archidamean War when Melos pledged assistance to Sparta and refused to ally with Athens. Melos' intransigence extended through 426 B.C. when it turned away a forceful attempt by Athens to subdue the city. Athens' aim in 415 B.C. is, therefore, based upon a policy reflecting an unwillingness to accept further Melos' disregard for the authority of Athens.²⁸ Melos as

Kagan describes, “[is] the outlet [Athens] needed for their energy and frustration” and a means to fulfill what was in 415 B.C. a keenness to enforce Athenian will and display its navy’s continued dominance of the sea. In conquering Melos Athens was sending a strategic message to friend and foe of its enduring influence and the powerlessness of Sparta to change that fact.²⁹

The Athenian wholesale killing of Melian males and sale of Melian women and children into slavery gives credence to a decay of reason under the pressures and passion of war. The expedition, Kagan tells us, signaled Athens’ departure from “the more moderate imperial policy of Pericles,” and its treatment of the Melian population sends a strong message of deterrence to those contemplating going against Athenian policy.³⁰

Athens’ decision to destroy the Melians gives credence to what Alberto Coll claims can be the deterioration of a state’s norms and restraints under a broader notion of necessity. In contrasting societal attitudes toward war in ancient Greece, and while rejecting the notion that a sense of repugnance for war is a relatively recent phenomenon, Bernard Brodie advises that although compassion existed for those suffering from war’s demands almost no revulsion to war existed. There was, Brodie explains, a dominant sense of war’s inevitability.³¹

Brodie’s observations aid in explaining Athens’ actions as a response to its strategic dilemma. For Athens, war is an instrument to sustain and even increase the vitality of its empire. Athens’ belief that a limited war with Sparta would indeed allow it to maintain the status quo is flawed by a failure of its policymaker at the war’s outset to realize its policy was not supportable by the ways and means available. Exacerbating

this strategic oversight by Pericles is his assumption of reason in Spartan leaders and the presumption that under such leadership Sparta's strategy would become frustrated, and that its population would tire and no longer continue the war.

Flaws and weaknesses within Athens' strategy are well documented by historians. Collectively these flaws serve almost as a checklist of things not to do in war. Topping the list is Athens' commitment of its strength, its navy, to objectives that offer little lasting impact. Athens' failure as the war progressed to build alliances to support its own security and as a means to generate an army that could match Sparta's was nearly as injurious as its reluctance to seek peace with Sparta at key opportunities. These gaps in Athens' strategic assessment ultimately subjected it to a longer and more costly war than envisioned.

Finally, through Thucydides' writings we come to appreciate what he observed as a weakness within what otherwise is the strength of the Athenian system—its open form of government. The entry of new political figures onto the stage of Athenian politics served to add complexity to an already confusing strategic situation. The personal pride and ambition existing in these new leaders promotes an inward and self-interested focus, one more interested in the competition for power than the collective interests of the population.³²

In 415 B.C. and on the eve of the decision for Sicily political division in Athens stem from the divergent views of its new leading statesman. Such division does not portend well for the future. Political discourse between Athens' competing political leaders, to include the initiatives they present to address what has become a prolonged and unproductive war, offer little in the eyes of the Athenian Assembly and citizens.

Nicias' moderate strategy finds little traction within the Athenian Assembly, due in part to the assembly's unwillingness to set aside what it perceives as the real cause of the war, Spartan arrogance. Alcibiades' design for a coalition to wage a decisive war against Sparta is problematic in view of Athens' self-serving leadership of the Delian League over the previous decade and because of Sparta's inherent strength.³³

Seemingly unrelenting pressures of war and their harmful impact on Athenian society combine with the ideas of new political leaders to have an almost paradoxical effect on Athens; that is reigniting the passions for victory while pushing an end to the war even further out of reach.

The Decision for Sicily

Debate over Athens' intentions for invading Sicily arguably remains as strong today as ever. Thucydides explains Athens' motivation as hegemonic in nature, its interest being in what gains it could acquire and that the Athenian population "[longed] for the rule of the whole island."³⁴ Kagan's disagreement with Thucydides' observations is based on an examination of Athens' previous excursions to Sicily, particularly between 427 and 424 B.C. Kagan argues that sufficient opportunity existed in that period for Athens to gain an understanding of the people, terrain and potential challenges residing on the island. Kagan soundly adds that similarity in the size of the expedition in 415 B.C with that of the expedition in 424 B.C. supports the argument for Athens' limited aims.³⁵

Disagreement over what is "the real explanation" for Athens' decision to send an expedition to Sicily does not, as one might tend to conclude, detract from the lessons that can be drawn from the strategic environment leading up to the decision. Simply

stated, history is not always as clear as one would hope. Presumably, Thucydides hoped that readers of his Peloponnesian War would understand what occurred and why. An element of that hope is the likelihood that a reader would also understand the influence of immutable human nature on strategy and the complexity it adds to determining ends, ways and means, and not simply that passion in war has the potential to overpower reason.

Policymakers and generals appreciating history as a vehicle for strategic inquiry should first understand its potential shortcomings and avoid its alluring and potentially false trappings. Arguably, such understanding promotes more insightful and objective investigation of the human dimension of war and the tremendous weight of responsibility and influence on those responsible for weighing its necessities and deciding its objectives. Exploring history means carefully evaluating what Hanson Baldwin refers to as, “man’s propensity to use armed force as the final argument.”³⁶

Grappling with History

Thucydides viewed the domain in which decisions of policy and strategy are made as circular in nature.³⁷ His belief that policymakers and generals could learn from what has already taken place in the domain of politics, or what Clausewitz defined as “the intercourse of governments and peoples,” is animated by reoccurring themes. He proclaimed that his record of the Peloponnesian War’s events—the Athenian expedition to Sicily in 415 B.C. being one of the more significant — “[is for] those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which will at some time or another and in much the same ways be repeated in the future.”³⁸

Historical inquiry receives its share of criticism. This discipline of recording events of the past is often viewed as a vast depot of circumstances, experiences and decisions to which mankind can return; a counter-balance to man's inability to see the future. Skeptics may reject the idea of history as a navigational chart by which the uncertain strategic environment and its volatile tides may be negotiated, and perhaps rightfully so. Many argue history's worth beyond its immediate rewards as dramatic narrative. Others may view history as herald, even a soothsayer offering warnings, instruction and validation of beliefs, supposition and principles. Such views are in large measure due to the misunderstanding of the terms *past* and *history*.

Antulio Echevarria in his article *The Trouble with History* outlines a common terminological pitfall. Echevarria suggests the two terms past and history are "commonly, but incorrectly used interchangeably." He argues succinctly that "the *past* is what happened while *history* is the historian's interpretation of what happened."³⁹ Yet interpretations matter: throughout the centuries that mark man's investigation of war theorists and military strategists have generated various notions of history's applicability to contemporary strategy.

One often encountered argument is the notion of experience accrued vicariously through an intellectual digestion of past events. A hypothesis in the context of strategy is that political leaders and generals schooled in the study of war acquire better understanding and improved ability to make strategic decisions. Arguably most students of war and strategy recognize the notion as nothing new. Both Clausewitz and Jomini advised that intuition existed within the realm of strategy. Both theorists conceptualized this intuition and commonly used the term *coup d'oeil* to capture its meaning; that is the

capability to rapidly absorb a general view of a position and to estimate its advantages and disadvantages, or the ability to quickly grasp the “big picture.”⁴⁰

Eliot Cohen, in his article the *Historical Mind and Military Strategy*, highlights Clausewitz’s appreciation for historical examples and their application in strategic decision-making. Cohen also notes Clausewitz’s skepticism over the manner such examples would be used, indicating that only those historical examples supporting the existing scenario and desired outcome might be selected.⁴¹ Debate over the U.S. offensive in Iraq is no exception, as evidenced by Victor Hanson’s skepticism over the analogy of Iraq as “the modern equivalent of the disastrous Sicilian expedition to Syracuse.”⁴² History, however viewed, appears to have found its niche with those seeking some reference point from which to view a strategic event, issue or principle. Whether a proponent or critic of a particular strategy, most if not all agree with Hanson’s assertion that discretion is highly advised when examining the past to make sense of the present.⁴³

It is reasonable to assert that man’s motivation to study war and strategy stems from an appreciation of war’s immutable nature and arguably its inevitability. Colin Gray cogently states, “Inherently flawed though it must be, history is all we have to help us. Since security and strategy are quintessentially practical matters, no potential source for our enlightenment should be neglected, least of all the highly variable access we enjoy to much of the past 2,500 years.”⁴⁴ Cohen advises, “[a]s important as the study of history for military strategists is the acquisition of the historical mind—that is, a way of thinking that uses history as a mode of inquiry. From practical cases to inspirations, history can help with military decision-making.”⁴⁵

Perhaps best bridging the existing divide between proponents and skeptics is the idea by Cohen of history as a “mode of inquiry,” or a way of thinking about historical circumstances and their application to current events. Cohen offers, “The historical mind will detect differences as well as similarities between cases, avoiding false analogies, and look for the key questions to be asking. It will look for continuity, but also for more important discontinuities; it will look for linkages between data points, but not too quick to attribute causation.”⁴⁶ Cohen puts forward that the historical education of political leaders and generals is more important today, in a strategic environment influenced by increased tempo and variety of change, than it has ever been.⁴⁷

Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May help to bring the argument full circle and perhaps to reasonable resolution by dispelling any notion of history as an answer sheet for future strategic tests. Neustadt and May advise, “the exact analogies do not hold, but it is not the exact analogies that stay in a readers mind. It is instead the illustrations of Thucydides’ proposition that human nature remains constant—or better, perhaps, that dilemmas of human governance remain so—the indications, in short, that 2,500 years ago bad and good political judgments were to be found in about the same proportions as today.”⁴⁸

The Decision on Iraq: Out of a Broader Notion of Necessity?

In the fall of 2001 the United States was attacked by foreign terrorists who commandeered and then flew commercial airliners loaded with passengers into buildings in New York City and Washington D.C. Their targets were the World Trade Center and Pentagon, renowned symbols of American economic and military power. It is plausible to assert that the 9/11 terrorists also sought to strike the White House or

Capitol Building in Washington D.C. but failed as the result of the heroic efforts of passengers who successfully overwhelmed the hijackers that had taken control of their aircraft but unfortunately could not prevent the aircraft from crashing into a field in Pennsylvania.

In the aftermath of 9/11 U.S. policymakers directed its forces to conduct operations against Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Bolstered by the passion of a population that sought to punish those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, U.S. forces aggressively sought the destruction of AQ leadership, its terrorist training camps, and Taliban forces. In addition, the establishment of a legitimate government in Afghanistan was directed in order to promote greater stability in the region. Despite the complexity characterizing operations against a nondescript, networked, and illusive enemy, Operation Enduring Freedom gave every indication of being aligned with the existing U.S. policy and strategy to defeat terrorism in the post 9/11 period.

Within a year and a half of initiating Operation Enduring Freedom and nested within a greater war on terrorism, U.S. policymakers ordered another offensive, this time to Iraq with the goal of ridding the country of its recalcitrant leader and destabilizing regime. Saddam Hussein's flouting of U.N. sanctions, suspected support for terrorism, and presumed development of weapons of mass destruction justified an extremely demanding, but no less coherent policy-strategy construct. Today we know that Saddam Hussein's WMD program was largely defunct at the time of the offensive. Additionally, at the time of the invasion Iraq's threat to U.S. vital interests seems to have been questionable at best.⁴⁹

Saddam Hussein's 1991 invasion of Kuwait, history of oppressing the Iraqi people to include use of chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds, and obstinacy toward U.N. directives exemplified the degree of instability his leadership imposed on the Middle East region. Nonetheless, the dominating belief held by key U.S. military leaders was that prior to 2003 Sadaam Hussein and the threat Iraq posed to America and the Middle East was contained.⁵⁰

If consensus existed over who the enemy was in the post 9/11 period it was linked to the names Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and Taliban, names arguably viewed as synonymous with "America's enemy." Yet the decision was made to invade a country of arguably tertiary importance to U.S. vital interests. What was the logic that led U.S. policymakers to such a decision?

Parallels that exist between the strategic environments surrounding the Athenian expedition to Sicily and the U.S. offensive to Iraq are worth considering. In 2001 the U.S. had sustained the worst attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor and even that infamous event over half a century ago entailed an attack against U.S. territory that was principally a military objective. Nonetheless, the impact of Japan's surprise attack and killing of thousands of Americans resonated throughout the American population. Nation-wide mobilization for war against a discernable enemy that had intentionally taken the lives of thousands of Americans seemed to correspond to every measure of American cultural identity. Although U.S. public opinion at the time reflected a desire to remain clear of the problems emerging in Europe and, in the wake of Pearl Harbor the western Pacific, America would not, and with respect to the defense of its vital interests, could not let such action go unaddressed.

U.S. operations in Afghanistan beginning in the fall of 2001 and despite the continuing U.S. presence in that country today, by most measures secured the intended strategic aim. Attrition of Al Qaeda and Taliban forces was achieved to the extent that major components of the AQ network were destroyed or neutralized and key Afghan population centers and government infrastructure freed of Taliban influence. The government of Afghanistan was returned to its rightful place though it continues to require U.S. support and assistance. In light of today's occasional machinations by residual Taliban forces and the fact that Osama bin Laden still remains at large can the U.S. initial offensive to Afghanistan be called a success? It can, and largely within the context of the wider conflict in which the U.S. now finds itself where we may perhaps also find the logic for its adventurous offensive to Iraq.

Steven Leblanc postulates, "If the ultimate long term goal in war is control over critical resources-without which you starve-then neither surrender nor negotiation is a viable option. Thus many ancient wars were long, drawn-out affairs with many stagnant intervals, in which allies and enemies came and went. The hope was that your side would get lucky, even if the odds were against you."⁵¹ To take from this quote the inference that an un-written aim of the U.S. offensive to Iraq was to gain control, or perhaps more accurately "retain access" to what is arguably a limited resource, namely oil, would perhaps overlook a significant driver of the U.S. decision to invade.

Though U.S. access to Middle East oil resources was, in 2003 as it remains today, a highly important consideration in U.S. foreign policy, Iraqi oil arguably is secondary to the potential exclusion of influence in the wider Arab and Muslim world. Similar to the strategic dilemma faced by Athenian policymakers in 415 B.C., where the

credibility and influence of Athens was diminishing beneath the weight of a war that it could not win, so too was the influence of the U.S. at risk of declining in its declared war on terror. Perhaps in part due to the moniker given to the war and in part due to the nature of the enemy the U.S. was fighting, U.S. policymakers in the wake of the results garnered from its initial operations in Afghanistan were in need of a military objective that was discernable and against which its military, a formidable instrument of national power and a symbol of U.S. resolve, could be applied. Whether one perceives the explanation of an Iraqi WMD program as legitimate or not, what can be argued with some conviction is that in the wake of 9/11 U.S. concern over the possibility for additional terrorist attacks as well as a sense of prestige lost and power being questioned were key drivers of the decision on Iraq. The long-standing debate over what logic led Athens to launch the Sicilian expedition may be paralleled by a debate over what led the U.S. to Iraq. However, no explanation generated will exclude with certainty the possibility that the pressure of the passions of war “captured the imagination” of U.S. policymakers and led to what arguably is today an adventurous offensive.⁵²

Lessons of the Past – a Source of Light to Guide One’s Path

The U.S. led invasion of Iraq will be a topic of debate for years to come. As the world watches an American-led coalition attempt to secure and stabilize Iraq and the ethnic and religious divides emerging in the wake of removing its dictatorial regime debate continues over the justification for the offensive, endurance of coalition forces, and a U.S. exit strategy. While there is a renewed sense of optimism over progress made through an increase in U.S. combat forces, namely “the surge” and recent

opposition by Iraqis toward Al Qaeda's extreme form of Islam, the outcome of the offensive in Iraq remains uncertain.

Entering its sixth year the U.S. offensive in Iraq is proceeding amidst a steady decline in support by Americans. Not surprisingly, fading support has been matched by increasingly pointed questions over what logic led U.S. policymakers to view Iraq as a military objective within a U.S. declared Global War on Terrorism. Certainly, U.S. concern over an Iraqi program of weapons-of-mass destruction (WMD) and support for terrorism cannot be discounted. However, fears over a nuclear Iraq have been calmed to a degree by the realization that Iraq was not the first state with an anti-western orientation to seek WMD, as well the lack of substantive evidence linking Iraq to acts of terror.

From Thucydides' record of the Sicilian expedition several lessons stand out and serve to illuminate and possibly warn political leaders who must lead in war under the dim light that characterizes the uncertain, complex, ambiguous and volatile strategic environment. First, policymakers must avoid, as Clausewitz warns, disregarding the permanent influence of the passions of fear, prestige and power and the influence of these passions on policy and strategy.

Second, cultural identity and the degree of pressure it can place on policymakers and the passion it can generate in populations can influence strategic decision-making to an extent that causes prudence and the sober calculation of war's costs and risks to be replaced by the pursuit of unlimited ends.⁵³

Thirdly, despite the success or failures encountered in war, policymakers should strive to keep the policy aim always in the forefront of their thinking. In strategic crises

there is a tendency by politicians, brought on by their sense of obligation to those they lead, to act precipitously. Such action can translate into the pursuit of objectives falling outside of the original strategic aim.

And finally, as Clausewitz suggests and as history bears out states employing offensives characterized by rapid and decisive action have the greater probability of securing the strategic aim. However, Clausewitz warns of the critical requirement to be achieved before war and by extension its offensives are undertaken; that is to “determine the kind of war on which their state is embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”⁵⁴ This quote highlights perhaps the most valuable strategic maxim policymakers and strategists can embrace. Its application in the operational level of war arguably is of greater value than ever, particularly in light of the evolving means and ways that war is being applied. Operations lacking coherent linkage to the political aim can be costly and of little benefit. Indeed, the potential risk and deleterious consequences of such pursuits speak directly to Clausewitz’s analogy of a nearby object being easier to reach than one that is further, but if the nearby object “does not suit [a state’s] purpose”—meaning its original and greater political aim—it only will make the latter that much more difficult to attain.⁵⁵ The greatest risk of course is in political leaders exposing the state to greater harm through the unnecessary, or rather fruitless expenditure of resources that only aids the enemy and its ability to gain advantage.

Conclusion

Adventurous offensives are a phenomenon that is not new. However, avoiding these exploratory, often quickly conceived, and risky commitments of military power is

not as simple as one might conclude. When a strategy for which policymakers are responsible leads into crisis the influence of popular passion can become extraordinarily pronounced. Bearing the weight of a culture's hopes, fears and aspirations policymakers can feel obligated to resolve issues of potentially grave strategic consequence. History reveals man's immutable nature, when exposed to the "pressure of the passions of war" and confronted with a narrowing of strategic options, can lead to decisions that verge on the irrational. An overwhelming sense of obligation by policymakers to do something can lead to the selection of unsound and harmful courses of action. Moreover, policymakers can be unwittingly and unfortunately encouraged toward such decisions because the recommended course of action appears logical as the result of its aligning with their culture's identity. Under such influence, decisions for immediate and deliberate action can bring greater and more long-standing harm to state interests. Indeed, adventurous offensives are a phenomenon for which policymakers as well as those that will be looked upon to lead offensives in war should remain ever vigilant.

Endnotes

¹ Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, (New York, NY, Touchstone, 1998), 366.

² Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 251.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

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⁵ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, (G & C. Merriam Company, Springfield, MA, 1965).

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 94.

⁷ Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classic Strategic Thought* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996), 61.

⁸ Dr. Alberto Coll, "Thucydides as Theorist," lecture, U.S. Naval War College, New Port, RI, 30 August 2000.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kagan, 8; see also J. F. Lazenby, *The Peloponnesian War: A Military Study* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2004), 13.

¹¹ Lazenby, 13.

¹² Kagan, 5-7.

¹³ Professor Tom Nichols, "Athens against Sparta: The Archidamean War," lecture, U.S. Naval War College, New Port, RI, 26 August 2000.

¹⁴ Kagan, 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., 51-52.

¹⁸ Nichols.

¹⁹ Joe Wolverton, II, "Lessons of the Peloponnesian War," *The New American*. 22 (9 January 2006) [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 10 December 2007.

²⁰ Kagan, 53, 69-70.

²¹ Ibid., 74.

²² Wolverton.

²³ Kagan, 69.

²⁴ Ibid., 188.

²⁵ Handel, 196. Handel references Clausewitz, *On War*, 91.

²⁶ Kagan, 192.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 247.

²⁹ Ibid., 247-249.

³⁰ Ibid., 249.

³¹ Bernard Brodie, *War & Politics* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1973), 230.

³² Robert B. Strassler, ed. *The Landmark Thucydides*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 128. and in Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, p. 245-249.

³³ Kagan, 246-247.

³⁴ Strassler, 365; and Kagan, 254.

³⁵ Kagan, 254.

³⁶ Hanson Baldwin, former Military Editor of the *New York Times* in the early 70's advised, "War, armed conflict in some form has been throughout history the most consistent and repetitive manifestation of man's propensity to use force as the ultimate argument."

³⁷ Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking In Time: The Use of History for Decision Makers*, (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 232.

³⁸ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin Books, 1954), 24; found in Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Use of History for Decision Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 232.

³⁹ Antulio J. Echevarria, II, "The Trouble with History," *Parameters*, Summer 2005, reprinted in *Strategic Thinking*, U.S. Army War College Selected Readings, AY08 (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, 2007), 411.

⁴⁰ Handel, 3.

⁴¹ Eliot Cohen, "The Historical Mind and Military Strategy," found in *Strategic Thinking* (U.S. Army War College AY08 Selected Readings), 396; an article based on a lecture delivered as a part of Thornton D. Hooper Lecture Series on American Strategy, 1 March 2005.

⁴² Victor Davis Hanson, "Battles Change, Wars Don't," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 October 2005 [newspaper on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 2 January 2008.

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⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 404.

⁴⁸ Neustadt and May, 265.

⁴⁹ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 21.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁵¹ Steven A. Leblanc, "Why Warfare? Lessons from the Past," *Daedalus*, (Winter 2007); 136 [database on-line]; available from ProQuest, accessed 19 December 2007.

⁵² Kagan, 255; describing the interest Alcibiades sparked in the minds of Athenian citizens over Sicily. Kagan writes, "Even before the assembly had taken place, Alcibiades, in contrast, had captured the imagination of the Athenian people, who sat in groups drawing the map of Sicily and of the sea around it and the harbors of the island."

⁵³ Dr. Alberto Coll, "Thucydides as Theorist," lecture, U.S. Naval War College, New Port, RI. 30 August 2000.

⁵⁴ Clausewitz, 88-89.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 597.

