



Sparta's Second Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 446–418 B.C. by Paul A. Rahe.

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Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* interests classicists, historians, and international relations scholars. It is a foundational text for the study of grand strategy. His dramatic account of Athens' Sicilian disaster has been adduced to shed light on American failures in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. His view that Sparta feared the rising power of Athens is the basis for debate on a recurring "Thucydides trap" vis-à-vis the United States and China.¹ Paul Rahe's *Sparta's Second Attic War* will reward anyone interested in better understanding Thucydides, whether as a literary author, (un)reliable historian, or teacher of grand strategy. It is the third book in a series that will conclude with the second battle of Mantinea in 362 B.C.² Rahe (Hillsdale College) has also written a companion volume explaining that the Spartans devoted themselves unreservedly to military training, while also cultivating allies in the Peloponnese in order to thwart a revolt by the helot slaves who greatly outnumbered them. Sparta developed a master plan to "keep their Argive enemies out, the helots down, and the Arcadians, above all others, in."³ Spartan grand strategy could never ignore the precarious position of the Spartan elite, and Rahe argues that any effective grand strategy must not be limited to foreign policy: "in thinking about diplomacy, intelligence, military strength, and that strength's economic foundations, one must always acknowledge the primacy of domestic policy" (xv).

Rahe begins with a brief summary of his previous books and an overview of his understanding of grand strategy. His emphasis on Sparta's internal challenges leads to a discussion of Carl von Clausewitz, Julian Stafford Corbett, and J.F.C. Fuller. Rahe describes the grand strategist as the leader who takes into account not only his military and naval forces, but also his nation's "moral power," its "will to win." The effective grand strategist evaluates the same factors in other nations (xvi). Rahe himself neither offers a straightforward definition of grand strategy, nor enters the controversy over competing definitions. He circles back to ancient Greece: "There were statesmen who approached the question of war and peace from a broad perspective of the very sort described by Fuller" and "nothing of lasting significance known by a grand strategist today" was not already known to Thucydides and those statesmen (xvi).

Following a prologue recounting the war between Athens and Sparta that ended in 446 B.C., Rahe divides his book into three parts. Part 1, "The Hatch and Brood of Time," covers the strategy

1. For criticism of the often superficial use of Thucydides, see Neville Morley, "Thucydides' Legacy in Grand Strategy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, eds. Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2018) 41–56.

2. *The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta: The Persian Challenge* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2015); *Sparta's First Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 478–446 B.C.* (id., 2020).

3. *The Spartan Regime, Its Character, Origins, and Grand Strategy* (id., 2016) 123. This formula echoes Lord Ismay: "NATO is intended to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." See Gregory F. Treverton, *America, Germany, and the Future of Europe* (Princeton: Univ Pr, 1992) 153.

of Pericles and renewal of the war in 431 B.C. We read the familiar story of Pericles' refusal to fight a pitched battle with the Spartans and insistence that the Athenians crowd into the city behind their walls and watch the Spartans ravage their fields; he shows how Sparta's strategy and tactics were ineffective. In Part II, "Fortune's Wheel," Rahe details the Spartan defeat at Sphacteria. Part III, "A Peace to End All Peace," explains how Sparta recovered from that defeat, withstood the challenge of Argos, and ended forever the threat posed by Athens. Rahe looks ahead to a new goal for Sparta: to move beyond the containment of Athens to its destruction.

Rahe's title *Second Attic War*, and his dates of 446–418 B.C. differ from the common framing of the Peloponnesian War (i.e., 431–404 B.C.), and orient the reader to look north from Sparta. Although he begins with Athenian expansionism, he induces the reader to watch, fearfully, from Sparta. He argues convincingly that Thucydides was right to attribute the outbreak of the war to this fear. The Spartans feared the helots, their allies, their enemies, and their gods. Theirs was a fragile polis, perpetually endangered and focused on conservation, in sharp contrast to Athenian confidence and expansion.

Ending in 418 B.C. and leaving Athens' Sicilian expedition for his next book allows Rahe to concentrate on the Spartans' defeat at Sphacteria, where 292 of its soldiers, including 120 elite Spartiate warriors, actually surrendered rather than fight to the death, as at Thermopylae. He also discusses the subsequent Spartan recovery after its victories at Amphipolis and the first battle of Mantinea.

Rahe's compelling analysis of Spartan grand strategy relies on ancient authors like Thucydides and Plutarch, archaeological excavations, inscriptions, and his personal exploration of Greek sites. He challenges both realists who believe Thucydides established universal principles and the classicists who doubt his reliability as a historian and argues that Thucydides created "puzzles for prospective statesmen to sort out for themselves" (237). Rahe shows that the fear felt by Sparta was not universally experienced by any state observing a rising power; it was a fear inseparable from Sparta's unique circumstances. Thucydides was indeed correct, but not for the reason the realists think. "If one treats Sparta, Persia, Corinth, Argos, Athens, and the like simply as 'state actors,' equivalent and interchangeable, in the manner advocated by the proponents of Realpolitik— one will miss much of what is going on" (xiv–xv).

Rahe's emphasis on Sparta's institutions and geopolitical challenges does not mean he ignores the significance of individuals and their choices. For example, in recounting the role of Brasidas, he writes,

The casualties on the [Spartan] side were negligible. It speaks volumes about Brasidas' brilliance as a commander that only seven of his men died. It speaks volumes about his personal courage and audacity that he himself was one of the seven—fatally wounded during the initial sortie. As one would expect, Amphipolis accorded him a public burial, and all of the allies joined together in honoring him with an armed procession. All that it had taken to humiliate Athens was the sacrifice of a single highly distinguished Spartiate. (224)

Rahe provides a picture of an excavated larnax (ossuary) and explains that it apparently contains Brasidas' remains.

Since Rahe skillfully brings many city-states into his narrative, an accurate, accessible map would have been a real asset. Instead the maps included are too often hit or miss: a map of the Delian League, oddly, omits Athens! Two pages later, a map of the Peloponnese clearly shows the Argive threat to Sparta. One wishes for a map of the Greek world on facing pages, showing at a glance why, for instance, Athenian interference in the Saronic Gulf was a serious threat to Sparta.

Although it is not necessary to read all the books in the series to understand *Second Attic War*, readers with only a cursory knowledge of Sparta would do well to peruse first *The Spartan Regime* (n. 3, above). One hopes that Rahe will follow Donald Kagan's example and condense his research into a single volume on the grand strategy of Sparta.⁴

⁴ Kagan's four-volume series comprises *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1969), *The Archidamian War* (id., 1974), *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (id., 1981), and *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (id., 1987). The single volume is *The Peloponnesian War* (NY: Viking, 2003).