Introduction: Makers of Ancient Strategy

From the Persian Wars to the Fall of Rome

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

MAKERS OF STRATEGY

Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, edited by Peter Paret, appeared as a 941-page volume comprising twenty-eight essays, with topics ranging from the sixteenth century to the 1980s. The work was published by Princeton University Press in 1986, as the cold war was drawing to a close. Paret's massive anthology itself updated and expanded upon the classic inaugural Princeton volume of twenty essays, *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler,* edited by Edward M. Earle. The smaller, earlier book had appeared more than forty years before the second, in 1943, in the midst of the Second World War. It focused on individual military theorists and generals; hence the personalized title, "Makers."

Although the theme of both books remained the relevance of the past to military challenges of the present, the 1986 sequel dealt more with American concerns. Its chapters were built not so much around individuals as on larger strategic themes and historical periods. Although both the editors and the authors of these two books by intent did not always explicitly connect their contributions to the ordeals of their times, the Second World War and the cold war are unavoidable presences in the background. Both books cautioned against assuming that the radical changes in war making of their respective ages were signs that the nature of conflict had also changed.

On the contrary, the two works served as reminders that the history of both the immediate and more distant past deals with the same concerns and dangers as exist in the tumultuous present. The study of military history schools us in lessons that are surprisingly apt to contemporary dilemmas, even though they may be largely unknown or forgotten—and all the more so as radically evolving technology fools many into thinking that war itself is reinvented with the novel tools of each age.

WHY THE ANCIENT WORLD?

In what might be thought of as a prequel to those two works, *Makers of Ancient Strategy* resembles in its approach (not to mention its smaller size) the earlier 1943 volume edited by Earle. The ten essays in *Makers of Ancient Strategy* frequently focus on individual leaders, strategists, and generals, among them Xerxes, Pericles, Epaminondas, Alexander, Spartacus, and Caesar. The historical parameters, however, have expanded in the opposite direction to encompass a millennium of history (roughly from 500 BC to AD 500) that, even at its most recent, in the late Roman Empire, is at least 1,500 years from the present. As a point of modern departure, this third work on the makers of strategy appears not merely in the second generation of industrial war, as was true of the 1943 publication, or in a third era of high-tech precision weapons of the nuclear age, as in 1986, but during so-called fourth-generational warfare. The late twentieth century ushered in a baffling time, characterized by instant globalized communications, asymmetrical tactics, and new manifestations of terrorism, with war technology in the form of drones, night-vision goggles, enhanced bodily protection, and computer-guided weapons systems housed from beneath the earth to outer space. Nevertheless, the theme of all three volumes remains constant: the study of history, not recent understanding of technological innovation, remains the better guide to the nature of contemporary warfare

As the formal lines between conventional war and terrorism blur, and as high technology accelerates the pace and dangers of conflict, it has become popular to suggest that war itself has been remade into something never before witnessed by earlier generations. Just as no previous era had to deal with terrorists' communiqués posted on the Internet and instantly accessible to hundreds of millions of viewers, so supposedly we must now conceive of wholly new doctrines and paradigms to counteract such tactics. But as the ten essays in this book show, human nature, which drives conflict, is unchanging. Since war is and will always be conducted by men and women, who reason—or react emotionally—in somewhat expected ways, there is a certain predictability to war.

Makers of Ancient Strategy not only reminds us that the more things change, the more they remain the same, it also argues that the classical worlds of Greece and Rome offer a unique utility in understanding war of any era. The ancient historians and observers were empirical. They often wrote about what they saw and thought, without worrying about contemporary popular opinion and without much concern either that their observations could be at odds with prevailing theories or intellectual trends. So there was an honesty of thought and a clarity of expression not always found in military discussions in the present.

We also know a great deal about warfare in the ancient Western world. The Greek and Roman writers who created the discipline of history defined it largely as the study of wars, as the works of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, and Livy attest. And while much of ancient history has been lost, enough still survives to allow a fairly complete account of a thousand years of fighting in the Greek and Roman worlds. Indeed, we know much more about the battle of Delion (424 BC) or Adrianople (AD 378) than about Poitiers (732) or Ashdown (871). The experience of Greece and Rome also forms the common heritage of modern Europe and the United States, and in a way that is less true of the venerable traditions of ancient Africa, the Americas, and Asia. In that sense, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western problems of unification, civil war, expansion abroad, colonization, nation building, and counterinsurgency all have clear and well-documented precedents in both Greek and Roman culture.

Makers of Ancient Strategy explores the most ancient examples of our heritage to frame questions of the most recent manifestations of Western warfare. The Greeks were the first to argue that human nature was fixed and, as the historian Thucydides predicted, were confident that the history of their own experiences would still be relevant to subsequent generations, even our own postmodern one in the new millennium.

THE ESSAYS

The contributors were encouraged to develop a topic close to their interests rather than mold material to a thematic template. In general, however, readers will find in each chapter an introduction that sets out the particular historical landscape and its players, followed by an analysis of the relevant ancient "maker"—statesman, general, or theorist—or strategy and an assessment of his, or its, success or failure. The discussion then broadens to consider the relevance of the strategy to later warfare, and especially to the conflicts of our times.

The essays are arrayed in roughly chronological order, moving from the early fifth-century Greco-Persian Wars (490, 480–479 BC) to the final defense of the borders of the Roman Empire (ca. AD 450–500). Of note, the era was one of empires. The extension of military power abroad, and with it often the political control of weaker states, is usually accompanied by official self-justifications. To launch us on empires and justification, in chapter one Tom Holland focuses on the first great clash of civilizations between East and West, the Persian efforts at the beginning of the fifth century BC to conquer the Greek city-states and absorb them into an expanded empire that would reach across the Aegean into Europe. Imperial powers, as Holland shows, create an entire mythology about the morality, necessity, or inevitability of conquest. Their narratives are every bit as important to military planning as men and matériel in the field. Such an imperial drive, he argues, is innate to the human condition and is not culturally determined. Imperial propaganda did not find its way into the later Western DNA merely through the rise of the Athenian Empire or Rome's absorption of the Mediterranean. Instead, imperialism and its contradictions were present from an even earlier time, as Greek pupils learned about the imperial ambitions of their would-be Persian masters and teachers.

The defeat of the Persian Empire in the early fifth century BC opened the way for the rise of the Athenian Empire. Today we assume that empire is an entirely negative notion. We associate it with coercion and more recent nineteenth-century exploitation, and deem it ultimately unsustainable by the ruling power itself. But as Donald Kagan shows in chapter two, rare individuals—and here he focuses on Pericles' thirty-year preeminence in Athenian politics and the contemporary historian Thucydides' appreciation of his singularity—occasionally do make a difference. Empire, especially of the Athenian brand, was not doomed to failure, if moderate and sober leaders like Pericles understood its function and utility. For a brief few decades under his leadership, Athens protected the Greek city-states from Persian retaliation. It tried to keep the general peace, resisted imperial megalomania, and fostered economic growth through a unified and integrated Athenian system of commerce. The success of Pericles and the failure of those who followed him are timely reminders that to the degree that imperial powers can further the generally understood common interest, they are sustainable. When they transform into an instrument only of self-aggrandizement, they inevitably implode.

The physical defense provided by fortifications helped the Athenian Empire retain its military supremacy for as long as it did. We assume that in our age of sophisticated communications and aerial munitions, old-fashioned fortifications are relics of a military past, if not always of questionable military utility. But increasingly we see their reappearance—though often augmented with electronic enhancements—in the Middle East, in Iraq, and along the U.S.-Mexican border. Recent walls and forts have often enhanced interior defense, in instances where seemingly more sophisticated tactics have often failed. David Berkey in chapter three traces the century-long evolution of walls at Athens, from the initial circuit fortifications around the city proper, to the Long Walls leading from Athens to its port city of Piraeus, 6.5 km distant, to the fourth-century attempts to protect the countryside of Attica through a network of border forts. These serial projects reflect diverse economic, political, and military agendas over 100 years of Athenian defense policy. Yet, as Berkey shows, they had in common a utility that kept Athens mostly safe from its enemies and offered additional manifest and ideological support for the notion of both empire and democracy. Statesmen, policies, and technology all change; fortifications of some sort seem to be a constant feature in the age-old cycle of offensive and defensive challenge and response.

Preemption, coercive democratization, and unilateralism in the post-Iraq world are felt recently to be either singularly American notions or by their very nature pernicious concepts that offer prescriptions for failure and misery to all those involved. In fact, these ideas have been around since the beginning of Western civilization and have proven both effective and of dubious utility. Thus, in chapter four I focus on the rather obscure preemptive invasion of the Peloponnese by the Theban general Epaminondas (370–369 BC), who was considered by the ancients themselves to be the most impressive leader Greece and Rome produced, a general seen as a much different moral sort than an Alexander or a Julius Caesar. At his death in 362, Epaminondas had emasculated the Spartan oligarchic hegemony and had led the city-state of Thebes to a new position of prominence. He founded new citadels, freed tens of thousands of the Messenian helots, and changed the political culture of Greece itself by fostering the spread of democratic governments among the city-states. How and why, through failure and success, he accomplished all this reminds us that what we have seen in the contemporary Middle East is hardly unique. Afghanistan and Iraq are not the first or the last we will see of messianic idealism coupled with military force, perceived as part of a larger concern for a nation's national security and long-term interests.

Great generals in the ancient world often became great public figures who forcefully changed the broader political landscape both before and after their military operations. More has been written about Alexander the Great than about any other figure of classical antiquity. Ian Worthington in chapter five reviews his creation of an Asian empire and the difficulty of administering conquered Persian land with ever-shrinking Macedonian resources. He offers a cautionary if not timely tale from the past about the misleading ease of initial Western military conquest over inferior enemy conventional forces, which soon transmogrify into or are replaced by more amorphous and stubborn centers of resistance. Even military geniuses find that consolidating and pacifying what has been brilliantly won on the battlefield proves far more difficult than its original acquisition. Alexander discovered that cultural sensitivity was necessary to win the hearts and minds of occupied Persia. Yet as a professed emissary of Hellenism, Alexander's aims in introducing what he felt was a superior culture that might unify and enlighten conquered peoples proved antithetical to his pragmatic efforts at winning over the population.

The twentieth century saw the superiority of most Westernized conventional militaries. Their superior technology, industrialized supply, and institutionalized discipline gave them innate advantages over most other forces. But when fighting was confined to the congested terrain of urban centers, when it involved ideologies and tribal affinities rather than the interests of nation-states, and when it drew civilians into combat, the outcome was uncertain at best. John Lee in chapter six shows there is also nothing new about contemporary urban fighting and the problems it poses for conventional infantry forces. The same challenges of gaining accurate local intelligence, winning the hearts and minds of civilians, and finding appropriate tactics to use among dense urban populations were of keen interest to Greek military thinkers and generals alike, when fighting frequently moved from the battlefield to inside the polis. Successful urban tactics in the ancient Greek world often required as radical a change in accepted conventional military thinking as the challenges of terrorism, insurgency, and sectarian violence from Gaza to Falluja do today.

There is also nothing really novel in the various ways that powerful imperial states keep the peace among various subject peoples and diverse provinces. Susan Mattern in chapter seven analyzes the various ways Rome kept together its multicultural and racially diverse empire and dealt with serial outbreaks of insurrection, terrorism, and national revolts. What made these events relatively rare in the half-millennium life of the empire, and why they were usually put down, did not hinge just on the superiority of the Roman army or its eventual mastery of counterinsurgency tactics. Equally important was a variety of insidious "hearts and minds" mechanisms that won over or co-opted local populations. Generous material aid, the granting of citizenship, education, a uniform law code equally applied, and indigenous integration and assimilation into Roman culture and life together convinced most tribes that they had more to gain by joining than by opposing Rome.

Terrorism, insurrections, and ethnic or religious revolts often baffle the modern nation-state. Its traditional forces certainly seem ill-equipped to fight on rough terrain or to root out nontraditional fighters amid sympathetic populations. But the dilemma is often a two-way street. In chapter eight Barry Strauss reviews slave revolts of antiquity—especially the well-known case of Spartacus's first-century BC rebellion against the Roman state—to show that the problems can be even worse for the challengers of state authority. If the goals of insurrectionists evolve beyond terror and mayhem to include mass transit through flatland or winning the hearts and minds of local populations, or even carving out large swaths of permanently occupied or secured territory, then at some point they must find parity with state forces in terms of conventional warfare. Despite the romance we associate with Spartacus, his slave revolt was overmatched by the logistics, discipline, and generalship of the Roman legions. His call for mass slave liberation had no real political resonance among Italians to rival the appeal of the Roman state. We may live in an age of incomprehensible terror and insurrection, but we too often forget that the military odds still lie on the side of the nation-state, especially when war breaks out within its own borders.

Western democracies and republics are wary of the proverbial man on the horse. And why not, given the well-known precedents of what Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon did to their respective consensual societies? Adrian Goldsworthy in chapter nine meticulously shows how the upstart Caesar, through his conquest of Gaul, outfoxed and outmuscled his far more experienced and better-connected Roman rivals. The lesson Goldsworthy draws is that the use of force abroad inevitably has political repercussions at home, and can prove as dangerous to republican societies that field superior armies as to the enemies that fall before them. Any time the citizenry associates victory abroad with the singular genius of one charismatic leader, then even in constitutional states there are likely to be repercussions at home when such popularity translates into political capital.

The Roman Empire—its formation, sustenance in the face of attacks from outside and internal revolts, its generals—often serves as a historical shorthand for the millennium of strategic thinking discussed in this book. Why, in the military sense, did Rome fall in the late fifth century? Most argue over whether its frontier defenses were stationary or more proactively aggressive, and whether such policies were wise or misguided. Peter Heather in chapter ten makes the point that the forces of imperial Rome, at a time when we sometimes think they were ensconced behind forts, walls, and natural obstacles, as a matter of practice ventured into enemy lands to ward off potential invasions. He also reminds us that the so-called barbarians on the borders of Rome by the later empire were becoming sophisticated, more united, and keenly observant of the methods by which Roman armies were raised and financed—and thus could be circumvented. The result is that we learn not only about the sophisticated nature of Roman border protection but, as important, how adept less civilized enemies really were. In short, military sophistication is not always to be accurately calibrated according to our own cultural norms, and Western states can lose as much because of adroit enemies as through their own mistakes and ongoing decline.

As historians of ancient times, the contributors might be dismayed by how little present makers of modern strategy and war making have learned from the classical past, how much ignored its lessons. Yet, in the spirit of the two earlier *Makers*, we avoid inflicting overt ideological characterizations of a contemporary political nature.

THE BURDENS OF THE PAST

Few formal strategic doctrines have survived from antiquity. No college of military historians wrote systematic theoretical treatises on the proper use of military force to further political objectives. Although there are extant tactical treatises on how to defend cities under siege, the proper role of a cavalry commander, and how to arrange and deploy a Macedonian phalanx or a Roman legion, there are no explicit works on the various ways in which national power is to be harnessed for strategic purposes. Great captains did not write memoirs outlining strategic doctrine or military theory in the abstract.

The historian Thucydides informs us of Pericles' strategic thinking, not Pericles. We learn of Epaminondas's preemptive strike against the Peloponnese from what others said he did rather than from what he or his close associates said he did. Caesar's own commentaries were about *how* he conquered much of Western Europe, not *why* its conquest would be beneficial to Rome, or the costs and benefits—and future challenges—of its annexation. Ancient historians chronicled both Alexander's brilliance in taking Persia and the subsequent challenges such occupation posed. Yet these dilemmas were not addressed in the abstract by Alexander himself or his lieutenants. We have a good idea, not from Greek captains but from classical historians, ancient inscriptions, and the archaeological record, of how Greek and Roman commanders dealt with insurrections, urban warfare, and border defense. In other words, unlike makers of modern strategy, the makers of ancient strategy were not abstract thinkers like Machiavelli, Clausewitz, or Delbrück, or even generals who wrote about what they did and wanted to do, such as Napoleon or Schlieffen.

The result is twofold. First, strategy in the ancient world is more often implicit than explicitly expressed. The classical military historian has far more difficulty recovering strategic thinking than does his more modern counterpart, and certainly the ensuing conclusions are far more apt to be questioned and disputed.

Second, as a result of this difficulty of classical scholarship and its frequent neglect, conclusions are often far more novel. We have thousands of books on Napoleon's or Hitler's strategy but only a few dozen on the strategic thinking of Alexander and Caesar. And if there are dozens of book-length studies on the grand strategy of George Marshall or Charles de Gaulle, there are almost none on Epaminondas's. If readers find in these chapters a great deal of supposition, a bothersome need for conjecture, and sometimes foreign citations, they also will discover much that is entirely new—or at least new manifestations of familiar things that they now discover are in fact quite old. The ancient world is sometimes thought to be irrelevant because it is so distant. But in an age of confusing theories, rapidly shifting technologies, and a cacophony of instant communications, the Greeks and Romans, precisely because of their distance and clarity, loom more relevant than ever. These essays are offered in the hope that the next time a statesman or general offers an entirely new solution to what he insists is an entirely new problem, someone can object that is not necessarily so. Rather than offering political assessments of modern military leaders' policies, we instead hope that knowledge of the ancient world will remind us all of the parameters of available choices—and their consequences.