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Modern Tragedy: How the Sicilian Expedition and the Iraq Campaign Exhibit Strategic Effects

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*Earlier this year, The Strategy Bridge asked university and professional military education students to participate in our first annual writing contest by [sending us their thoughts on strategy](#).*

*Now, we are pleased to present one of the essays selected for honorable mention, from Brent W. Thompson of the Naval War College.*

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## **Introduction**

Thucydides, who authored the definitive account of the Peloponnesian War, started writing as soon as the conflict began, "...believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it." [1] His account has also proved valuable for evaluating ensuing conflicts through to the present day. As Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote, the Peloponnesian War showed that "strategic problems remain the same, though affected by tactical difficulties peculiar to each age." [2]

***In the present age, the United States' decision to invade Iraq as part of the War on Terror is analogous to the Athenian experience in Sicily in its strategic effects.***

In his history, Thucydides details several different strategies pursued by Athens and Sparta, the parties to the conflict. Perhaps one of the most perplexing moves is the Athenian decision to attack the Syracusans at Sicily, a democratic society nearly 800 miles to the west of Athens, instead of their Spartan enemy to the immediate south. [3] The decision proved to be disastrous. In the present age, the United States' decision to invade Iraq as part of the War on Terror is analogous to the Athenian experience in Sicily in its strategic effects. It represents an extended campaign, in the wrong theater, at the wrong time.

## **The Sicilian Campaign**

During the 17th year of the Peloponnesian War, with the fight between Athens and Sparta at a stalemate and in the midst of a nominal truce, the Athenians held an Assembly and decided to attack Sicily. [4] The Assembly based its decision, in part, on the belief that money was abundant in the Sicilian temples and treasuries. The Athenians chose Nicias against his will to command the expedition, despite his warnings that the expedition was ill-considered. Nicias recommended staying in place, continuing to heal from the pestilence that had been affecting Athens, and preparing to defend themselves more effectively against the Spartans. [5]

Nicias's advice did not carry the day. Instead, the Athenian Assembly decided to follow the advice of Nicias's opponent in this debate, Alcibiades, who argued the cities in Sicily were rivals and would likely not unify against an Athenian opponent. He expressed the belief that the number of Sicilian hoplite infantry was inflated and barbarian opponents in the region would join the Athenian effort.[6] Alcibiades also argued the strategic advantages were too great to ignore: if Athens succeeded, it would extend its power across the Mediterranean Sea and become enriched by the spoils of war. According to Alcibiades, even if the expedition failed, the Athenians could easily return to their ships and sail back to Athens. Even a glancing blow against the Syracusans would cripple their ability to support the Spartan war effort and increase Athenian standing in the region.[7] Remarkably, Alcibiades provided no evidence to support his position.

Anticipating that Alcibiades had persuaded the Assembly to undertake the Sicilian expedition, Nicias argued that Athens required overwhelming numbers of hoplites and ships to be successful. He purposely argued for 100 trireme ships and at least five thousand hoplites, thinking this excessive number would either cause the Assembly to reconsider the expedition, or at least provide him with maximum security.[8] Ironically, this cautionary force estimate actually fueled enthusiasm within the Assembly, and they voted to give the generals the requested hoplites and equipment. With no other recourse available, Nicias reluctantly mustered the Athenian force and set sail for Sicily.[9]

Although Athens experienced some initial success in the war effort, the Syracusans and their allies eventually countered the offensive and routed the Athenians. Forced to flee to the Assinarus River, and dying of exhaustion and thirst, the Athenians were cut down even while drinking the muddy and bloody water in which they were fighting.[10]



*"Destruction of the Athenian Army in Sicily" by Hermann Vogel, showing the final defeat of the Athenian at the river Assinarus. (Eon Images)*

## Strategic Similarity: The Iraqi Campaign and Sicilian Expedition

As Thucydides noted, war is “a rough master that brings most men’s characters to a level with their fortunes.”[11] How were the fortunes of Athens and the United States similar during their respective wars? We can begin with the *casus belli*, the reason for which the parties were at war. Both Athens and the United States were military superpowers who were preemptively attacked by weaker opponents. Sparta feared the growing power of the Athenians. [12] Al Qaeda sought to force an American withdrawal from the Middle East, to be replaced by radical Islamic states.[13] Athens and the United States also responded similarly by attacking their opponents directly. Athens sent hundreds of ships to raid the Peloponnesian coast and the United States, through the deployment of special operations forces and Central Intelligence Agency operatives, “expelled al Qaeda from Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime without deploying any of its regular ground troops.”[14]

After directly attacking the homelands of their opponents (or at least, in Al Qaeda’s case, a land in which they enjoyed sanctuary), Athens and the United States changed their strategic focus toward a different theater of operations entirely. Athens, as noted earlier, decided to attack the Syracusans in Sicily. To the United States, operations in Afghanistan became *the other war* as it diverted considerable resources toward a fight in Iraq instead.[15]

The Peloponnesian War and the Iraqi campaign are notable in that both interventions featured a general, who, at the outset, cautioned that the undertaking would require more forces than anticipated. Nicias, as mentioned earlier, hoped to change the Athenian Assembly’s mind by stressing the need for “great numbers of hoplites” and “overwhelming superiority at sea.”[16] Similarly, Army General Eric Shinseki voiced his concern before Congress that the anticipated force size was inadequate.[17] Like Shinseki, many in the military were skeptical of their civilian leadership's estimates of troop strength and time required: “It will take 300,000 soldiers and 20 years,” said one young officer. “Anything else is happy talk, and the generals are complicit.”[18]



*General Eric Shinseki, left, Army Chief of Staff, testifies in February 2003 before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Capitol Hill along with Admiral Vernon Clark and General Michael Haggee of the Marine Corps. (KRT)*

Just as Athens experienced initial success against the Syracusans, the United States quickly toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, needing just three weeks to bring down the dictator and his ruling party.[19] However, the United States soon began to "stumble, and stumble badly." [20] American forces, which were well-prepared for a conventional conflict, were unprepared for a brutal irregular war.[21] Just as Athens had anticipated a hasty withdrawal if the war effort did not go their way, American military leaders expected to invade, oversee a transition, and leave quickly. The United States began the war with the impression that it would be "as short and cheap as the relatively bloodless interventions" in which it had engaged since Vietnam.[22] Two years after the invasion, 140,000 troops remained in Iraq, despite widespread anticipation the undertaking would already be complete by that point.[23] Military leaders did not anticipate Iraq would devolve into "a deeply fractured and distressed collection of individuals and groups, too traumatized for real self-rule and certainly for reconstruction." [24]

Unfortunately for Athens and the United States, neither prepared properly for the fight, nor did they possess the appropriate cultural knowledge for the region in which they fought. As Nicias pointed out before the expedition:

"We go to found a city among strangers and enemies, and that he who undertakes such an enterprise should be prepared to become master of the country the first day he lands, or in failing in this to find everything hostile to him." [25]

Likewise, the United States was not prepared to become "master of the country" after invading Iraq. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, forbade members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party from holding their previous jobs and disbanded Iraq's security and intelligence services. Hundreds of thousands of professionals and government officials lost their jobs, and critical institutions ceased to function. In addition to Al-Qaeda jihadists who stepped into the void, a widespread Sunni insurgency was born.[26] Across the country, American successes collapsed, and sectarian violence escalated into a civil war.[27] Like Athens, the United States was brought low by a military engagement having little to do with its original reason for going to war.

## **Differences Between the Expeditions**

One can draw critical distinctions between the Sicilian campaign and the American experience in Iraq. First, the very natures of the conflicts were different. Athens was engaged in as conventional a conflict as one could expect for the time. Athens, a naval power, was pitted against Sparta, a land power—a situation often described as "an elephant attempting to fight a whale." [28] The two superpowers engaged in battle on land and sea over an extended period. The Sicily campaign merely represented a different front in their ongoing war. Unlike a counterinsurgency campaign, Athens was not trying to win hearts and minds. Instead, Athens sought to conquer Sicily and to break the spirit of the Spartans.[29]

In contrast, the United States did not engage in a conventional offensive, except for the initial invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. After a few weeks of maneuver warfare, the fight in Iraq became one of "population protection" in which the Sunni-Shia mixed neighborhoods were "critical terrain" and the military attempted to provide security and stability.[30] Iraq was only

tangentially related to the war against Usama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. The United States sought to depose Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime and eliminate any weapons of mass destruction, based on the oblique fear such weapons might be used in a terror attack.[31]



*At the United Nations, then-U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell holds a model vial of anthrax, while arguing Iraq is likely to possess weapons of mass destruction. (U.S. Government Photo/Wikimedia)*

Because of the differing natures of the conflict, the methods and results differed as well. Athens suffered supply chain difficulties as it attempted to extend its influence abroad; the United States had the luxury of relying on an extensive logistical network for armaments, fuel, and materiel. Athens suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of the Sicilians. The United States, in contrast, was bled out over the course of an extended counterinsurgency.

The Athenian Assembly and American administration reacted differently to the generals' estimates for soldiers and supplies. In the case of Nicias, his speech produced the opposite of his intended effect. He asked for large numbers to dissuade the Assembly from attacking Sicily. Instead, the Assembly "fell in love with the enterprise," fulfilling his request, and more.[32] The original plan for 60 triremes expanded to well over 100 ships.[33] In contrast, American General Eric Shinseki expressed public concern on troop levels, but the administration forced him to do more with less.[34]

The dissimilarities continue. At the time of the Peloponnesian War, Sicily was an independent, democratic society. Alcibiades planned to attack Sicily while engaged in a war with Sparta; this would be analogous to the United States deciding to attack India during its war in Afghanistan. There is a strong argument Iraq had nothing to do with the war against Al Qaeda, and thus

provided no strategic benefit. Attacking Iraq would give no advantage to the United States other than theoretically deprive Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations of a haven. In contrast, a successful attack on Sicily would allow Athens to gain a significant advantage over its primary opponent, Sparta. Athens would control the major trade routes throughout the Mediterranean, enriching itself while starving Sparta of critical food and supplies. An American victory in Iraq would not guarantee an ultimate triumph over Al Qaeda and other terrorist networks—but an Athenian triumph in Sicily likely would have been a decisive blow against Sparta.

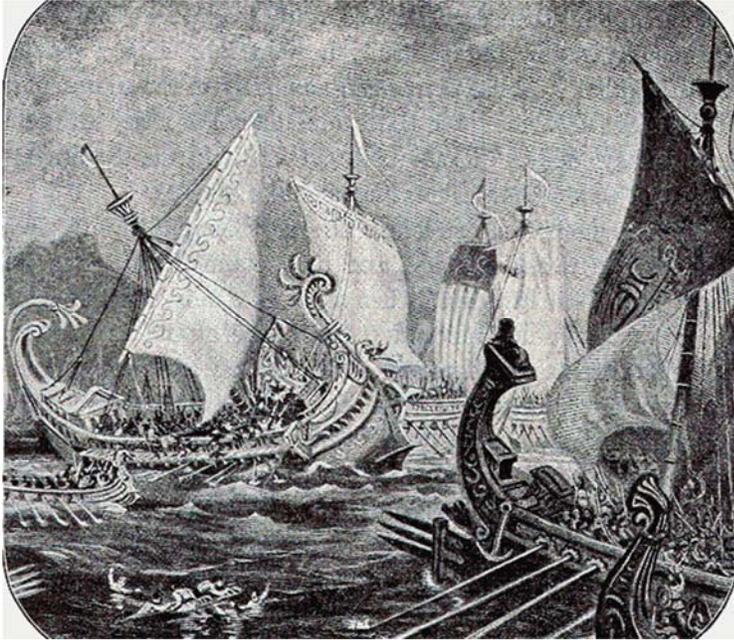
### **“History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”[35]**

The Athenian invasion of Sicily and the American experience in Iraq were not identical, but no two wars ever are. Instead, we must look at the overarching effects the military campaigns had on political objectives. In the case of Athens, the attack on Sicily forced the island into an alliance with Sparta. This two-on-one coalition influenced Persia to throw its support to Sparta as well. Equipped with triremes purchased by their Persian allies, Sparta eventually carried the day.

In the case of Iraq, the American presence was similarly an “aggravator of the conflict.”[36] While an American presence in Iraq did not influence other powers to ally against it (with the possible exception of Iran), it did increase the amount of violence it experienced in the country. The ultimate result of the Iraq conflict is not yet known, but “[n]o matter what the ultimate outcome in Iraq, it is clear that such a wishful reading of history, even if it does not yield failure, will, most assuredly, produce misfortune.”[37]

### **Conclusion**

The decisions of Athens and the United States to pursue out-of-sector missions against Sicily and Iraq, respectively, ultimately failed. The ill-fated Sicily campaign was the true strategic turning point in the Peloponnesian War. After Athens squandered so much of its power in Sicily, it became vulnerable to a Persian-backed Sparta. Spartan admiral Lysander eventually captured almost the entire Athenian fleet while it was on the beach in the Hellespont.[38] Athens, unable to keep its sea lanes open without a navy, was blockaded, starved, and eventually forced to sue for peace.[39]



*Battle of Aegospotami, where the Spartan Navy led by Lysander decisively defeated the Athenian fleet in 405 BC. (Alchetron)*

Its missteps in Iraq did not doom the United States to an ultimate national defeat, but the campaign “represented an American failure to anticipate the chaos of a society subjected to decades of exceptionally brutal dictatorship and prolonged warfare.”[40] The United States “failed to anticipate that once the clamps of Saddam [Hussein’s] rule were removed, what would remain were not the structures of a fairly normal society, but a deeply fractured and distressed collection of individuals and groups, too traumatized for real self-rule and certainly for reconstruction.”[41]

Importantly, the American strategy did not achieve its political aims, just as the Athenian strategy failed to achieve victory over the Spartans. For the United States, the strategy of transition to Iraqi forces glaringly failed to include the mission of *defeating the insurgency*. [42] Even in the few areas where United States forces created military strategies, “there was no *political* strategy to address that reality [that the Sunni had no reason not to fight an insurgency], and absent one the war would continue until the Sunni were dead, gone, or defeated.”[43]

Sparta gained total victory over Athens, but enjoyed only short-lived supremacy in Greece. As for the American expedition into Iraq, it “was a folly as egregious as Vietnam. But it was a war with far higher stakes, and the consequences of defeat would reverberate throughout the Middle East.”[44] The ultimate effect on the United States remains to be seen. Perhaps, like Athens, it will rise from defeat. However, its ill-conceived decision to respond to a terror attack linked to Afghanistan by attacking a sovereign government in Iraq may forever connect it to the Athenian folly nearly 2,500 years prior.

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*Header Image: U.S. Army M1A1 Abrams tanks and personnel pose for a photo under the "Hands of Victory" in Baghdad's Ceremony Square Operation Iraqi Freedom ([TSgt John L. Houghton/USAF Photot/Wikimeida](#))*

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## **Notes:**

[1] Thucydides. *[The Landmark Thucydides](#)*. Edited by Robert B. Strassler. New York: The Free Press, 1996, p. 3.

[2] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *[Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land](#)*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1915, p. 222.

[3] *See* Thucydides, *supra* note 1, pp. 361-363.

[4] *See* *Ibid.*, p. 366.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 366-368.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 371-372.

[7] *Ibid.*, 372.

[8] *Ibid.*, 375-376.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 376-377.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 477.

[11] *Ibid.* p. 199.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[13] Harmony Project, “Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qa’ida 1989-2006.” West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, September 2007, p. i.

[14] Thucydides, *supra* note 1, p. 106.; Thomas Barfield. [\*Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History\*](#). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 277.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 333.

[16] Thucydides, *supra* note 1, p. 374.

[17] Linda Robinson. [\*Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq\*](#). New York: Public Affairs, 2008, p. 12.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[19] Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. [\*Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War\*](#). New York: Free Press, 2006, p. 248.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 251.

[21] *See Ibid.*, p. 248.

[22] Robinson, *supra* note 18, pp. xvii-xviii.

[23] Cohen and Gooch, *supra* note 20, p. 248.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 250.

[25] Thucydides, *supra* note 1, p. 375.

[26] Robinson, *supra* note 18, pp. 1-4.

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

[28] Commander Rob Krivacs, Lecture, “Athens v. Sparta—A Possession for all Time,” Naval War College Fleet Seminar Program, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, 5 October 2016.

[29] Thucydides, *supra* note 1, p. 368.

[30] Robinson, *supra* note 18, p. 33.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[32] Thucydides, *supra* note 1, pp. 375-376.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] Robinson, *supra* note 18, p. 12.

[35] Unknown, attributed to Mark Twain.

[36] Robinson, *supra* note 18, p. 20.

[37] Cohen and Gooch, *supra* note 20, p. 251.

[38] Thucydides, *supra* note 1, p. 549.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Cohen and Gooch, *supra* note 20, p. 250.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Robinson, *supra* note 18, p. 32 (emphasis added).

[43] Ibid., p. 19 (emphasis in original).

[44] Ibid., 363

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