The

Constraints

on Warfare in

the Western

World

Laws

War

Edited by

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When approaching the subject of agreements regulating the conduct of interstate war, it is important to separate the relatively informal, socially mandated and enforced rules of war from legally enacted laws of war.

Here my emphasis will be on the former, since there is little evidence that the archaic and classical Greeks enacted internationally recognized laws governing the practice of warfare. There are only two real candidates for long-term, formal, sworn agreements intended to control the form taken by armed conflict among the mainland Greek states. First, a tradition reported by the geographer Strabo (10.4.48) claims that in the course of the War of the Lelantine Plain on the island of Euboea in about 700 B.C., the contending parties (including most of the big states) agreed to ban the use of projectile missiles. A second tradition, mentioned by the orator Aeschines (oration 2, On the Embassy 115), suggests that after the so-called First Sacred War (fought over control of the oracle of Delphi) of about 600 B.C., the victorious states swore never again to cut off besieged fellow Greeks from food or water. Upon examination both traditions look very dubious—the supposed covenants are reported only by relatively late sources and they were certainly not always honored in practice.

Moreover, despite the existence of the Amphictyonic League (an "international" organization of Greek peoples which regulated the affairs of Delphi), there is no evidence for the Greek development of what H. L. Hart called "first order rules" regarding military conduct—that is, no organized procedure for enacting the laws that might govern interstate warfare. In the absence of securely attested and formal "second order" laws (actual sworn covenants), and without evidence for first order rules by which such covenants might have been devised, there is not much to say about classical Greek laws regarding general military conduct.

On the other hand, Greek combatants did recognize a number of rules of engagement, and these rules do seem to have been generally regarded as normative in that their breach could occasion indignant comments in our sources. The rules of war, which in the late fifth century B.C. were sometimes referred to as the "common customs (koina nomima) of the Hellenes" (Thucydides 3.59.1, 6.4.5; cf. Euripides Heraclidae 1010), range from what might be called neoformal rules to practices conditioned largely by practicality. There was in antiquity no canonical list of the rules. But the following, in descending order of formality, seem to me to sum up the most important of the unwritten conventions governing interstate conflict:

1. The state of war should be officially declared before commencing hostilities against an appropriate foe; sworn treaties and alliances should be regarded as binding.
2. Hostilities are sometimes inappropriate: sacred truces, especially those declared for the celebration of the Olympic games, should be observed.
3. Hostilities against certain persons and in certain places are inappropriate: the inviolability of sacred places and persons under protection of the gods, especially heralds and suppliants, should be respected.
4. Erecting a battlefield trophy indicates victory; such trophies should be respected.
5. After a battle it is right to return enemy dead when asked; to request the return of one's dead is tantamount to admitting defeat.
6. A battle is properly prefaced by a ritual challenge and acceptance of the challenge.
7. Prisoners of war should be offered for ransom rather than being summarily executed or mutilated.
8. Punishment of surrendered opponents should be restrained.
9. War is an affair of warriors, thus noncombatants should not be primary targets of attack.
10. Battles should be fought during the usual (summer) campaigning season.
11. Use of nonhoplite arms should be limited.
12. Pursuit of defeated and retreating opponents should be limited in duration.

I will risk asserting, as a broad generalization, that most of these informal rules were followed, most of the time, in intra-Greek warfare of 700 to 450 B.C. The main problem in proving this assertion is the very lacunar nature of our sources for the practice of intra-Greek warfare in the seventh and sixth centuries. But when the evidence is assembled, as it has been by W. Kendrick Pritchett and Victor Hanson, the impression of a relatively clear set of rules is strong. There is more evidence to back up my next two assertions. First, rules of war pertained primarily in intra-Hellenic conflicts (rather than in wars between Greeks and non-Hellenes). And second, these rules, and especially numbers 5 through 12, tended to break down in the
period 450 to 300 B.C. The bulk of this article is devoted to investigating the implications of the premise that the three assertions are correct: that the informal rules of war listed above did in fact pertain among Greeks before the mid-fifth century, that they were developed in the context of intra-Greek warfare, and that war by the rules was considerably less common after the mid-fifth century.

If we assume that the rules of war listed above did once pertain in mainland Greece, we may ask in whose interest the rules were developed and maintained. Raising the question of interest seems valid, in that any argument which assumes that a universal sense of fair play and decency was an innate part of early Greek military culture is easily falsified. Even a casual reading of the Iliad makes it clear that some of the rules of war I have listed were not deeply rooted in Homeric society. The warriors of the Iliad do indeed show some respect for sworn truces and for the sacrosanctity of heralds, but otherwise the conventions of Homeric warfare are quite different. Achilles' brutal treatment of his fallen enemy, Hector, may be an extreme, but one can cite, for example, the night raid of Odysseus and Diomedes, culminating in Diomedes' cold-blooded execution of the war prisoner Dolon and slaughter of sleeping men (10.454–97). Use of projectile weapons (spears, arrows, rocks) is key to the action in the Iliad; pursuit of retreatng enemies is vigorous and savage. There is no campaigning season and no formal distinction between Hellene and barbarian. Homeric society is at least partly a poetic fiction, but I think that one can safely assume that most of the Hellenic rules of war with which we are concerned crystallized in a historical era after the Homeric epics were written down, that is, after the mid to late eighth century B.C. If this is right, then the Greek rules regarding the proper conduct of warfare were presumably formulated in the course of the seventh century—the age in which Greek warfare came to be dominated by the highly organized formation of massed heavy infantry known as the phalanx. And thus it is reasonable to seek an answer to the cui bono question among the ranks of the hoplites themselves. 6

Who were the hoplites? Or, more precisely: who could be a hoplite and how was the class of the hoplites defined? The answer varied somewhat over time and from polis to polis. But the simple answer is that an adult free male could be a hoplite if he could afford the capital investment in the appropriate arms and armor, and could afford to spend a good part of the summer marching about the countryside and fighting when called upon to do so. The typical hoplite was an independent subsistence farmer: a man who owned enough land—perhaps ten or fifteen acres—to support himself and his big family without the need for family members to work for wages on a regular basis. At Athens, the polis for which our evidence is best, in 594 B.C. the reformer Solon distributed political privileges hierarchically among four economic classes. Membership in each class was determined on the basis of annual agricultural production. Those in the top class had to be able to demonstrate that their farms could generate 500 standard units of produce. Membership in the second class of cavalrymen required 300 units. The third class, requiring a minimum of 200 units, was dubbed the zeugitai, or yokemen. The fourth class was composed of laborers (thetes). The third census group is the Athenian equivalent of the hoplite class—its members were probably called yokemen either because they were metaphorically yoked together in the phalanx or because they could afford a yoke of oxen. Both etymologies (whether right or wrong) are appropriate: the hoplites were in essence yoked together when they marched in the phalanx, since each hoplite soldier depended upon the men next to him in the line as surely as an ox depended upon its yokemate. And the minimum size of a moderately successful independent farm was probably about the size of holding at which keeping a yoke of oxen for plowing and other hard labor was economically feasible—roughly ten to eleven acres. 7

How large was the hoplite class as a percentage of the total free (male) population? The simple answer would usually be a "substantial minority." Basic infantryman's equipment was not outrageously expensive. 8 Given the frequency of conflict in Greece and the dominance of phalanx tactics, every Greek state had a vested interest in maximizing the pool of heavy infantrymen, and hence it was counterproductive to deny those who could afford hoplite armor and weapons the opportunity to use them. In the period of the battles of Marathon and Plataea (490 and 479 B.C., respectively), Athens could field some nine thousand hoplites, which represented perhaps a fifth to a third of free adult males. 9 Assuming that the sociological distribution of the preimperial era population of Athens was not radically atypical of central and southern Greek norms, we may suppose that in the period 700 to 450 B.C. hoplites typically represented roughly 20 to 40 percent of the free adult males of a Greek polis. The hoplite class (including here the families of the hoplites themselves) would thus have represented a minority of a Greek city-state's total population: an elite indeed, but not a tiny or particularly exclusive elite. Moreover, when speaking of hoplites, we must use the term class with some care: the heavy infantry did not represent an economically homogeneous group, and the relationship of individual hoplites to the economic mode of production will have varied. Although in some poleis (for example, Athens) the very wealthiest citizens served in the cavalry, in every polis some hoplites were considerably wealthier than others. 10 Rich hoplites in many poleis undoubtedly employed slaves in working their estates. Others depended on occasional employment of wage laborers. Those at the bottom of the group depended primarily on the labor of draught animals and family members. Only a very few of the richest hoplites would have avoided the necessity of working their land with their own hands.

Phalanx warfare evolved rapidly in the early seventh century B.C. and it was soon fully institutionalized as the dominant mode of violent dispute resolution between the Greek poleis. And it was the hoplites themselves, as a relatively broad-based social elite, who benefited most from the rules of warfare which had evolved in the course of
the seventh century. These informal rules ensured that it was the heavy infantrymen who dominated intra-Greek military encounters (rather than the wealthier cavalrymen, poorer light-armed skirmishers, or more specialized archers and slingers). During the archaic and classical periods the Greek way of war, which placed the heavy infantry in the center of the action, supported and reinforced the privileged social position of the hoplite class vis-à-vis the very rich and the poor. Because their arms determined the outcome of military encounters, the hoplite class occupied a clearly defined middle ground between the small elite of leisured aristocrats and the majority of males who were unable to afford hoplite equipment. Although it is dangerous to speak of a self-conscious Greek middle class, the hoplites, as a well-defined social group, staked out a broad and central position in polis society and their social centrality had clear political ramifications.

If we view the world from the perspective of the hoplite class, we can see how the practice of warfare limited the influence of both the very rich and the poor. The rich men who served in the cavalry gained thereby an opportunity to display their wealth in a conspicuous fashion—but their role in battle was limited to scouting and protecting the flanks of the phalanx. The free poor and the unfree (whether slaves or helots) were relegated to a largely logistical role in times of war: they could carry the gear of the fighters, but were not effective fighters themselves. Because traditional Greek ideology strongly linked social and political status with the ability to fight in defense of family and community, the leisure class often found it difficult to impose a political order exclusively dominated by the very rich. By the same token, the poor and unfree could effectively be excluded from political participation and various social privileges. In short, the practice of hoplite warfare tended to define the limits of, but also to undergird, the social and political hierarchies of the Greek polis.

On the other hand, the experience of the phalanx helped to promote an egalitarian ethos within the ranks of the hoplites themselves. The rich hoplite might have prettier armor, a fancier crest, and a more highly decorated shield than the struggling farmer of ten acres who stood next to him in the line, but the two men used offensive weapons that were virtually identical and each was utterly dependent upon the other in matters of defense. Steadfastness was the primary virtue of the hoplite warrior. In times of combat, leaping out in front of the line or flinching back from it were equally disruptive to the all-important cohesion of the phalanx. The goal of the phalanx was complete homogeneity of effort. Men who were economic unequals were thus equalized in combat, and this egaliatarian habit translated from battlefield to polis life. Hoplite egalitarianism reached its apogee in classical Sparta, where the educational, sociocultural, economic, and political systems all emphasized the complete homogenization of a hoplite class that was coextensive with the citizenry.

Although few Greek poleis took either hierarchy or egalitarianism to Spartan extremes, hoplite warfare was an important structural element in archaic and early classical Greek society in that it reified existing lines of social distinction (especially between independent farmers and poor laborers) at the same time that it promoted social and political equality within the ranks of the upper third or so of polis society. The socially constructed and socially maintained rules of war buttressed this social system. Each of the rules numbered five through twelve, above, helped to maintain the long-term practical workability of the hoplite-dominated socio-military system: since to request one's dead was to admit defeat, and that request could not legitimately be refused by the victors, the outcome of a single battle was generally regarded by both sides as decisive, at least for a season. Thus wars tended to be brief affairs which could be fought effectively by amateur farmer-soldiers. The rituals of challenge to battle and acceptance of the challenge, the limitation of combat to a short campaigning season, and the limited use of nonhoplite arms lessened the impact of war on farmlands and ensured that only appropriate players took key roles on the field of battle. Generally lenient treatment of defeated enemies, the ransoming of prisoners of war, and the lack of determined pursuit of retreating soldiers kept casualties within an acceptable range. The ideologically significant ritual of the battle could thus be performed quite frequently (and thus its social impact could be maximized) without risking demographic catastrophe for the participants.

It is perhaps in the relative uninvolvement of noncombatants in archaic and early classical Greek warfare that the social bases of the rules of hoplite combat are manifested most clearly. Traditional hoplite war is in essence warfare without strategy: the aim of each phalanx was to engage the other phalanx head-on. This ritualized (although genuinely violent and bloody) form of conflict was efficient in that it determined which side was superior quickly and decisively. Although tactical maneuvering, or even trickery, might be employed in the attempt to fight from the most advantageous position, the goal of each side remained simple: to meet the enemy soldiers in an open battle. This was not the only way the Greeks could have chosen to fight. The hierarchical society of the polis offered a seemingly obvious target for a strategy based on sociopolitical subversion. Those who were disadvantaged by the Greek social system (the unfree and subhoplite populations) represented a potential Achilles' heel for many poleis; revolts by Sparta's helot population demonstrated just how willing the oppressed might be to turn against their masters. Invaders who persuaded the poor and unfree to fight their oppressors, or simply to withhold their labor inputs (most obviously by running away), would severely hamper their opponents' war effort. Yet until well into the Peloponnesian War, the strategy of encouraging discontent among the enemy's lower social strata was not employed. It is hardly necessary to point out that Greeks were both inventive and capable of serious analytical thought. But in Greece, as in other human societies, innovation was channeled by
social priorities. Until the last third of the fifth century B.C., strategies based on attacking the enemy’s social and economic system were effectively banned by the informal rules of war—rules which thereby further reinforced the existing social order. From about 700 to 450 B.C. intra-Greek wars were fought by fellow participants in what we might fairly call the hoplite-centered social order. Because of constraints imposed by the rules of war, these conflicts rarely became a matter of a polis’s national survival. It was a very different matter when Greeks fought non-Greeks. In the best documented series of Greek-barbarian conflicts, the Persian Wars of 490–478 B.C., the issue for many poleis was national survival and the Persian invaders were not participants in the socio-military system I have sketched out above. Although the Greek defenders at Marathon and Plataea used hoplite formations against the numerically superior Persian forces, they did not employ the ordinary norms of intra-Greek combat. In their conflict with the Persians the Greeks summarily executed heralds (Herodotus 7.133) and offered no formal challenge to battle or exchange of war dead. Retreating Persian soldiers were pursued relentlessly and slaughtered in the thousands at Marathon, and most of the Persian survivors of the battle of Plataea were massacred after the Athenians successfully stormed their camp. Greek conduct during the Persian Wars demonstrates clearly the essentially voluntary nature of the rules of intra-Greek conflict and points to the possibility of a voluntary defection from those rules.

In the century after about 450 B.C.—and especially during the Peloponnesian War of 431–404 B.C.—the informal Greek rules of war broke down. Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War demonstrates how the rules listed above were violated in the course of the long and drawn-out conflict—for example, in executions of enemy ambassadors, seamen, and allied troops (by both Athens and Sparta); and in massacres of captured prisoners of war: Thebans by Plataeans in 431, Plataeans by Thebans and Spartans in 427, Melians by Athenians in 415, Athenians by Syracusans in 413. The last of these atrocities was set up by a sustained strategic pursuit of the Athenian army by Syracusan forces. But perhaps the most striking departure from previous practice was the conscious employment of systematic pressure on the enemy’s social system: in 425 the Athenians threatened the internal stability of Sparta by constructing a military base at Pylos in Messenia, from which they encouraged hoplite insurrection. The Spartans eventually responded with a permanent base at Decelea in Attica, precipitating the flight of over twenty thousand Athenian slaves. Although hoplite phalanx battles were still being fought and some of the old rules honored in specific circumstances, the general structure of war by the rules was shattered in the late fifth century B.C. and never effectively reconstructed thereafter.

The question that confronts us, then, is why the socially stabilizing system of war by the rules fell apart. Although prodromic symptoms of the breakdown can be detected well before 431 B.C., the great Peloponnesian War fought by the hegemonic alliances led by Sparta and Athens is clearly implicated. As Thucydides points out in the introduction to his History (1.1, 1.23.1–3), this was a war unlike any that had been fought on Greek soil. Thucydides implies that at the outbreak of the war, Sparta (with its agricultural, hoplite-based economy) was the quintessential hoplite power and Athens was a very nontraditional naval power. The Spartans entered the war expecting a typical conflict that would be decided by phalanx battles fought according to the usual rules. The Athenians had something rather different in mind. Thus it is to Athens that we must turn in attempting to understand why it was that the system of war by the rules failed to survive the fifth century B.C.

In the mid-fifth century the polis of Athens was exceptional in several ways: very big by mainland Greek standards at about one thousand square miles and with an adult male citizen population of at least forty to fifty thousand, Athens was a preeminent naval power and controlled a great Aegean empire. Moreover, Athens was a democracy. A series of revolutionary political reforms, initiated in the sixth century and largely complete by 450 B.C., had resulted in the evolution of a startlingly original form of direct government by the people. Key political decisions in Athens—including all matters of state finance and foreign policy—were made in open and frequent assemblies at which every citizen had an equal vote. Legal matters were decided by people’s courts staffed by large juries of ordinary citizens. Most government officials were chosen by lot; a few—including the generals—were elected to renewable annual terms of office. Leaders, including the redoubtable Pericles, maintained their positions by demonstrating ability in handling financial and military affairs and by rhetorical skill in public debates. The existence at Athens of the political system of democracy had important social ramifications. In Athens all citizens, regardless of their property holdings, regardless of whether or not they could afford hoplite armor, were political equals in that each Athenian’s vote in assembly and lawcourt was of equal weight. Because the relatively poor (those who could not afford hoplite arms) were in the majority and had developed a sophisticated consciousness of their own place in Athenian politics, the political center of gravity at Athens was lower than in nondemocratic poleis. And this low center of political gravity gave Athens remarkable stability.
where. The difference, of course, is that the Athenian citizen population (native males and their families) was a much larger percentage of the total population.

In part as a direct consequence of democratic ideology, the hoplites of Athens were considerably less self-consciously a class than they were in other, nondemocratic poleis and Athenian society was not dependent for its stability on maintenance of a stable hoplite ideology. This blurring of the lines between the hoplites and the poorer citizens of Athens can be traced in the aftermath of the oligarchic coup of 411 B.C. The Athenian hoplites played a key role in overthrowing the narrow oligarchy of the Four Hundred and they participated in the establishment of a new government in which full citizenship would be limited to the hoplite class. This so-called Constitution of the Five Thousand earned Thucydides' praise (8.97.2), but it never jelled into a stable government. Within a few months Athens had evolved back into a full democracy—the Athenian hoplites simply did not have an adequate sense of themselves as a distinct group to sustain a form of government based on hoplite identity. The role of the hoplite class in the maintenance of social stability at Athens was further undercut in the early- to mid-fifth century by the burgeoning importance of the Athenian navy. The rise of the navy was roughly contemporary with the flowering of Athenian democracy. The creation of a major naval force in the mid-480s, at the behest of the politician and general Themistocles, allowed Athens to play a central role in the defeat of the Persians at Salamis in 480 B.C., and subsequently led to the hegemony of Athens over the Delian League—a coalition of Aegean coastal and island states which coalesced after the defeat of the Persians. With the evolution of the Delian League into an Athenian empire in the second quarter of the fifth century, the navy became the key arm of Athenian military forces. As Aristotle later recognized, the growth of Athenian naval power was linked to the development of democratic political institutions because traditional Greek ideology linked the value of the citizen to his role in the defense of the state. The trireme warships of Athens were rowed largely by citizens who could not afford hoplite armor—as the navy's role became more and more decisive to the exercise of Athenian power in the Greek world, the poorer citizens took a larger and more direct role in the day-to-day governance of the state.19

I suggested above that in many Greek poleis the informal rules of warfare aided in the survival of the hoplite class and abetted its social and political dominance. In terms of military conventions, a key result of the conjoined growth of democratic political culture and the navy at Athens was the social and political displacement of the Athenian hoplites. The mass of ordinary citizens rather than the hoplite class now defined the political and military center of gravity of Athens. As a result, Athenian social structure was no longer fundamentally dependent on a continued adherence to the hoplite ideology—not to the rules of war which sustained that ideology. The interests of the hoplite class no longer determined either the general direction or the specific decisions of Athenian internal and foreign policy. And so by the mid-fifth century B.C. the Athenians could afford to break the rules of war. Their unique social system meant that the Athenians need not fear social instability as a result of this breach of convention, and their unique political system meant that men with a primary stake in maintaining the rules were no longer in charge.

Democratic government at Athens led to the formation of an implicit social contract that integrated the interests of middling and poorer citizens and so allowed the extraordinarily large manpower resources of Athens to be safely and efficiently deployed in naval operations. This factor proved to be of key importance in the creation and the maintenance of the Athenian overseas empire. By 450 B.C. Athens was a major imperial power, controlling some one hundred sixty subject states—this was the first and only really successful empire run by a Greek polis. Whatever the subjects of the empire may have thought about their position, the empire was run for the profit of Athens, and the financial resources which accrued to Athens as a result of hegemony were enormous by Greek standards.20 By the date of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, Athens had amassed a large strategic financial reserve—and as Thucydides points out (1.141.2—1.142.1), that cash reserve had a decided bearing on how Athens chose to fight the war with Sparta. Traditionally, Greek wars were decided quickly, usually by a single battle. No Greek state dominated by the hoplite class would desire or could afford a long, indecisive conflict.21 But democratic, imperial Athens could. Once again, unique circumstances, linked to the existence of the democracy, naval power, and empire rendered the traditional rules of war irrelevant to the Athenians.

So far, I have laid out the structural factors which made it possible for Athens to ignore the rules of war. But I do not suppose that just because this approach had become possible it was in any sense inevitable. Before the possibility could become an actuality someone had to see that recent developments had enabled a new approach to war, had to come up with a concrete operational plan, and had to persuade the Athenians to go along with the plan. That someone was Pericles. The two Periclean assembly speeches in Thucydides' History, along with Thucydides' own comments, make it clear that Pericles had in fact devised a strategic plan for fighting the Peloponnesian War.22

The conflict Pericles foresaw was that of a land power against a sea power and on the face of it the land power seemed to hold the advantage. In a traditional war by the rules Sparta and its allies would march into Athenian territory; the smaller, less highly trained Athenian phalanx would meet the invader's challenge by marching out into the open fields and would be defeated. The Athenian navy would never become a factor in the conflict, and Athens would have lost the war in the first year. Not liking the implications of this scenario, Pericles determined to change it. His plan was simple and radical. Since the Spartans would win a war that was fought according to
the traditional Hellenic rules of engagement, Pericles reasoned that Athens might be able to win by opting out of the rules. This was a key moment in the history of Greek warfare in that it was the beginning of truly sophisticated long-term strategic analysis. Rather than worrying about the tactical problem of how to win a particular battle, Pericles thought through the interplay of a variety of forces—military, financial, political, and psychological—over the course of a war that he knew would take several years at least. He had, in essence, invented grand strategy.

The key to success in Pericles’ plan was for the Athenian land army to avoid engagement with the Peloponnesian army: when Sparta invaded Attica, the Athenian hoplites must refuse the ritual challenge to battle and remain barricaded behind the city’s walls. Without an army of defenders to fight, the Spartan-Peloponnesian phalanx would be rendered impotent. The invaders would not risk assaulting the walls. Nor was Sparta likely to attempt a siege of the city-Piraeus complex; this would require a huge counterwall and the Peloponnesians could not spare the manpower to hold it. Finally, the Spartans could not hope to starve the Athenians out; the empire of Athens provided the revenues and its Long Walls and its warships security. Athenian merchantmen would resupply the city fortress from grain markets in Egypt and south Russia. Given the clear naval superiority of Athens, its deep financial reserves, and its independence from the hoplite ideology, the defensive side of Pericles’ strategy was thoroughly rational. 23

But how was Athens to defeat Sparta? The Spartan center of gravity—in military, social, and political terms alike—was the hoplite citizenry of the Peloponnesus and the Athenian navy could not threaten these men directly. An indirect approach might be more productive. Sparta’s hoplite class lived from the surplus generated by the oppressed and potentially restive helots of Laconia and Messenia. With Sparta distracted by helot revolts, the Peloponnesians would be stymied. In the event, although a series of naval raids were launched against the Peloponnesian coasts, Athens established no base in Spartan territory during the first six years of the war. It seems likely that despite his radical decision to ignore some of the traditional conventions of engagement, Pericles foresaw no need for a wholesale abandonment of the rules of war. His initial offensive goal was probably a limited one: control of Megara, a small city-state whose territory lay north of the Isthmus of Corinth and west of Attica. Megara was strategically located across the land routes from the Peloponnesus into central Greece. The passes through the Megarian mountains were defensible: the Athenians had set up the battle of Tanagra by occupying the Megarian passes in 458 B.C. If Athens could permanently control the Megarian passes, the Spartans would be bottled up in the Peloponnesus and Athens would have a free hand in central and northern Greece. Thus, rather than overthrow, Pericles aimed at containment of Sparta: an extension to the mainland of the operational plan that had worked well in

the Aegean against the Persians since 478. And containment of Sparta, he believed, could be achieved by a limited withdrawal from the conventions of hoplite warfare. 24

When the Peloponnesian army arrived in Attica late in the summer of 431 B.C., Pericles’ war plan was put into effect: the Athenians evacuated the country districts, took up residence in the city, and refused battle with the Peloponnesian army. The invaders were stymied and left Attica a few weeks later, having accomplished virtually nothing. Once the Spartans and their allies were safely back in the Peloponnesus, Pericles sent the Athenian land army into Megarian territory where it ravaged Megara’s small agricultural plain. If this pattern had kept up for a few years, all might have gone as Pericles had planned. Eventually the Spartans would have become frustrated with their meaningless incursions; eventually the Megarians, excluded from Aegean trade by the Athenian fleet and with their agriculture disrupted annually, would have submitted to Athens. 25

But of course that was not the way it actually worked out. A devastating plague reduced Athenian manpower, imperial subjects became restless, Athenian generals turned to the strategy of social disruption, and their Spartan counterparts proved equally capable of employing innovative strategies of social subversion and economic coercion. In the end the Athenians lost because the Spartans realized that the war could be won by expanding the theater of operations and their own resource base. Persian subsidies allowed Spartan admirals to launch attacks on the states of Athens’s empire, to threaten the overseas grain routes, and to challenge the navy that guarded the empire and the sea lanes. By the end of the war the Spartans had proved just as willing to ignore the customs of engagement as their opponents, and the old regime of war by the rules was a dead letter. 26

Cut free from traditional constraints, warfare rapidly developed a new style in the fourth century B.C. Although hoplite phalanx battles were still fought (witness, for example, the battles of Nemea, Leuctra, and Mantinea), intra-Greek conflicts were no longer limited in duration, there was no fixed campaigning season, and the combatants were less frequently citizen hoplites. The employment of mercenaries, often highly specialized light-armed fighters, meant that pursuit and annihilation of defeated enemies became more common. Noncombatants were increasingly the targets and victims of strategies based on social disruption and destruction of economic resources. 27

The new style of combat had considerable impact on Greek society. The practice of war now tended to undermine rather than support the existing social order of many poleis. With the abandonment of the rules of conflict that had undergirded it the old hoplite ideology lost its coherence; the center could no longer hold. Without the mediating factor of the political and social dominance of the hoplite class, the underlying conflicts between rich and poor escalated more easily into bloody internecine
conflicts. Moreover, the strategies of economic coercion employed by fourth-century armies produced serious economic dislocations and widespread impoverishment. And thus the new warfare contributed materially to the wave of civil wars that wrecked so many Greek poleis in the late fifth and fourth centuries—the conditions that Thucydides (3.69–85) described as pertaining in Corcyra in 427 B.C. became a recurrent theme in the history of many Greek states.

Paradoxically, Athens, the state whose policies appear to have done most to precipitate the breakdown of the traditional rules of war, exhibited extraordinary social and political stability in the decades after the end of the Peloponnesian War. Once again the explanation can be sought in the well-developed and resilient democratic political culture of Athens. Since Athens did not depend on the hoplite ideology for the maintenance of social order, the collapse of that ideology had few directly adverse effects on the polis. Just as in the second half of the fifth century the existence of the democracy had made a break with the traditional rules conceivable, so too in the fourth century the democracy allowed Athens to weather the storm generated by war without rules. And so, despite the traumatic loss of the Peloponnesian War, by the mid-fourth century the Athenians found themselves in much better shape than their victorious rivals, Sparta and Thebes—poleis whose social and political regimes were intimately bound up in what I have been calling the hoplite ideology.

Finally, what of the relationship of the Greek rules of war and military technology? When compared to modern society the ancient Greek world was notoriously nontechnological. There is, however, one area in which the Greeks did demonstrate considerable technological inventiveness: siege weaponry and its defensive corollary, military architecture. The link of military technology with the rules of war is quite clear. During the period in which hoplite warfare dominated the Greek scene there was little advance in siegecraft. Hoplite equipment and training were ill-adapted to the conduct of efficient siege operations, and relatively simple walls were sufficient to deter most assaults. But with the breakdown of hoplite warfare and the rules that had sustained it, siegecraft and defense against siege became more serious issues. And so, not surprisingly, the period from 400 to 300 B.C. saw rapid advance in both military architecture and siege technique.

Because warfare in the age after the Peloponnesian War tended to be destructive to state economies and civilian populations, Greek poleis expended considerable efforts to exclude enemy forces from economic and population centers. City walls were built and rebuilt: at Athens, for example, major work was undertaken on the city circuit in the period 395 to 385 B.C., and again in 337, 307, and in the third century. Perhaps even more impressive were efforts to exclude enemy troops from economically vital rural areas. The Thebans constructed a stockade around their central agricultural districts in the 370s. And in the middle decades of the fourth century, Athens, Thebes, and probably other poleis as well constructed elaborate systems of border fortifications intended to preclude enemy forces from entering and ravaging the interior.

By the mid-fourth century B.C. both besiegers and defenders were typically utilizing catapult artillery. Originally invented as a siege weapon by arms makers employed by the tyrant Dionysios I of Syracuse in 399 B.C., the nontorsion (crossbow-type) catapult was a frightening antipersonnel weapon. But early catapults were not strong enough to endanger well-built stone walls, and so for a time the expenditure of polis assets for perimeter defense seemed the most logical course of action. But not for long: by about 340 B.C. engineers in the employ of Philip II, king of Macedon, had developed the first true torsion (hair or sinew spring) catapults. Torsion machines, which threw large stone balls, proved their worth by smashing city walls at Alexander's epic siege of Tyre in 322 B.C.

It is hardly an accident that the first version of catapult artillery was developed in the workshops of an imperialist Sicilian tyrant, the second phase in imperial Macedonia. Technological development and rearmament with the new machines required financial assets that much exceeded the means of ordinary Greek poleis. By the late fourth century B.C. few individual poleis could hope to win conflicts against the great dynasts who controlled the money and manpower generated by Macedonian expansionism. As we have seen, border defense strategies were a primary response of several Greek poleis to the military situation precipitated by the collapse of the traditional conventions governing the conduct of intra-Hellenic warfare. But the new artillery technology developed by Philip's engineers helped to render border defense strategies obsolete. Rural forts proved unable to hold off Hellenistic generals in the late fourth and third centuries. The dynastic successors of Alexander with their highly trained mercenary armies and with their superior artillery dominated the military landscape. The upshot was that polis citizens were left with no very effective military response to the threat offered by hostile forces deployed by the several new great powers. The city-states of Greece with their limited economic and manpower resources could not compete in the new military climate and therefore the age of the truly independent polis drew to a close.

In conclusion, the relationship between the Greek sociopolitical order and the rules of war that I have attempted to trace above leads to a paradox—and one that quite frankly gives me pause. Archaic and early classical Greek social mores and political culture supported a form of warfare that was highly, if informally, rule oriented. The rules of early intra-Greek warfare successfully constrained the horrors of war while supporting an overtly hierarchical social order. In the fifth century B.C. the polis of Athens discovered in democratic politics a way to broaden the base of the social order and, as a result, Greek culture blossomed as never before. Classical Athens witnessed the apogee of polis culture, marked by bold innovations in many
spheres: literature, visual arts, philosophy—and military strategy. Unfettered by the need to maintain a rigid social hierarchy, Athenian leaders were free to experiment with military strategies that ignored some of the constraints imposed by the traditional rules of war. This initial period of experimentation, while not intended to overthrow the rules, precipitated an unprecedented series of innovations in military strategy, personnel, and technology. And these innovations in turn did overthrow the rules of war and in the process undermined the social and political order on which independent polis culture depended. Thus Athenian democracy was, in a sense, the condition of its own impossibility. This is, I believe, a profoundly disturbing conclusion for any citizen of a democratic state. On the other hand, fourth-century Athenian history may suggest that more democracy is the most appropriate response to crises precipitated by the new options presented by democracy. It is perhaps in forcing historians of politics, culture, and society to confront paradoxes such as this one that the study of international security finds some part of its justification.
Notes

1. Constraints on Warfare

2. *Ibid.*, 76.

2. Classical Greek Times


7. Solonian classes: David Whitehead, “The Archaic Athenian Zeugitai,” Classical Quarterly 31 (1981): 282–96. Plot size and drought animals: Ober, Fortress, 19–23. The unit of measurement (medimnos) is equivalent to about 1.5 bushels. The actual yield of an average hoplite farm would not have been anywhere near 300 bushels of grain, but the figures were meant to refer to total wet and dry yield, including olive oil, wine, and perhaps other sorts of produce as well.


9. In 479 the Athenians fielded eight thousand hoplites at Platea, at a time when a good number of Athenian hoplites were serving as marines on the Athenian triremes (Herodotus 9.28.6, 8.131). Athenian demography in the period of the Persian Wars: Jules Labarbe, La loi navale de Thémistocle (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957), 190–211; in general Mogens H. Hansen, Demography and Democracy (Herning, Denmark: Systime, 1985). It is important to remember that slaves were also part of the society, and in some poleis (e.g., Sparta) the nonfree population was a very significant part of the total population. The size of the Athenian slave population is unknown, but I doubt it was very large before or after the wealthy imperial period of the mid- to late-fifth century; see Ellen M. Wood, Peasant-Citizen and Slave: The Foundations of Athenian Democracy (London: Verso, 1988). Robert Sallares, The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World (London: Duckworth, 1991), 53–60, has recently argued that the slave population of Attica was only about twenty thousand, about one-sixth that of the citizen (native-born adult males and their families) population.


13. Limited damage to cropland: Victor D. Hanson, War and Agriculture in Classical Greece, Biblioteca di studi antichi 40 (Pisa: Giardini, 1983). Casualty rates: Peter Krentz, “Casualties in Hoplite Battles,” Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies 26 (1985): 13–20. Krentz’s figures may actually be too high since they necessarily derive from well-attested great battles in which casualties were probably atypically high.


19. The constitution of the Five Thousand: Edward M. Harris, “The Constitution of


21. The focus of hoplite warfare on decisive battle is the central thesis of Hanson, *War*.


3. The Age of Chivalry


10. Leyser, "Canon Law and Knighthood," 564–65. As Leyser points out (ibid., 566), the distinction between the armed noble and the unarmed commoner was not new in the eleventh century. But it was increasingly sharply drawn from about 1100 on: see Keen, *Chivalry*, 23–30; Contamine, *War*, 31.


12. Keen, *Laws of War*, 19. It is worth noting that *pauper* in medieval Latin meant "powerless," not "poverty-stricken." In practice, of course, there was considerable overlap between the two conditions.
