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In the summer of 431 B.C., the hoplite army of Sparta's Peloponnesian League mustered at the Isthmus of Corinth. Although the warriors dreaded the horrors of battle, the overall mood of the army was confident—after all, Spartan hoplites were the best fighters in the world, and the Peloponnesian land forces considerably outnumbered their Athenian enemies. They knew that Athens was a powerful city-state, but they thought that a few humiliating defeats in the open plains of Attica (the province of Athens) would put the Athenians in their place. As the Peloponnesians marched north to the cheerful music of pipes, few of them could have had any inkling of what was to come: a devastating war that would drag on for a full generation, shatter state economies, and exterminate whole populations.

The duration and violence of the Peloponnesian War, unique in the Greek experience, can be attributed, at least in part, to a new level of long-range planning on the part of the Athenian high command. Modern military analysts, who tend to assume that strategic thought and war are inseparable, may find it a peculiar notion that strategy had to be invented. Yet the city-states of archaic and early classical Greece launched many wars without the kind of analytic forethought about the relationship between policy—political decision making—and military force that is the basis of strategic planning. It was only in the fifth century B.C. that long-range strategy became an integral part of Greek combat, and its development was one of the most important—and, as we will see, ominous—innovations in the history of Western warfare.

By the late seventh century B.C., Greek warfare had achieved its classic form: a voluntary contest between two phalanxes of heavy infantry, fought by formal, if unwritten, rules in the open plains. The hoplite conflict was, in its essence, war without strategy. The invading force of citizen-soldiers mustered, marched into the territory of the defenders, and offered battle by a ritual challenge. The defending citizen-soldiers accepted the challenge by coming out of their walled city, forming up their phalanx, and charging. The stronger side won the battle, and hence the war. The stakes were generally low, frequently the control of a tract of grazing ground, and the result was that only a few men died.

To the modern strategist, the most striking aspect of the hoplite battle was its voluntary nature. Southern and central Greece is mountainous, and there are generally only a few ways beyond passes into the territory of any given city-state. These passes could be held by relatively inferior forces against heavily encumbered invading armies, as shown by campaigns of the fourth century B.C. Yet there are remarkably few examples of Greek defenders holding passes against Greek aggressors before the late fifth century. Moreover, by the fifth century most Greek towns were well fortified, and Greek siegecraft remained relatively primitive until the mid-fourth century. Those inside the city wall did not have to worry overmuch about an enemy assault. Why, then, did defenders come out to fight in the first place? Why not simply ignore the challenge?

The answer is that hoplite battle was not based on rational calculation of short-term economic interest. Rather, it was a form of dispute resolution. It provided a way for a highly competitive culture divided into hundreds of independent states to resolve territorial disputes and to answer the ever-important question, Who is most powerful?

Hoplite battle was extremely violent, but the violence was limited to an afternoon's battle. For the rest of the year, the citizen-soldiers could go about living their ordinary lives. The rituals of the agon (literally "contest") precluded rational strategic thought. When war is a contest fought according to set rules, there is no place for innovation.

The agon of hoplite conflict allowed disputes between states to be decided without destroying the material or demographic base of either side. Furthermore, it served to integrate the citizen society of each Greek polis. The discipline of the phalanx was a counterweight to the strong Greek cultural norm of individual competition. Within the phalanx the aim was cooperation, and the competition fought by the hoplites was a communal action against an external enemy. Steadiness and cohesion were more valued than individual weapons skills, so the phalanx tended to teach lessons in the value of acting as equals when faced with a common danger. These lessons were eventually translated into the political realm. It is hardly an accident that democracy was a Greek invention. Yet for all its value in reducing the carnage of intra-Greek warfare and in stabilizing internal order, the no-strategy system of the agon was fragile. It required acquiescence to the rules of
OF STRATEGY

agon, or ritualized battle—and the beginning of what goals with operational plans. by Josiah Ober

war by all participants, even by states that usually lost. Eventually, some Greek general would realize the advantages of breaking the rules.

But meanwhile, there were other challenges to face, and events would soon lead to the “invention” of strategy. By the early fifth century B.C., the aggressive, expansionist Persian Empire was unquestionably the greatest power in the Mediterranean world, and Greece was an attractive prize. Persia was the heir to over two millennia of Near Eastern imperial states. While the long-term military success and great territorial extent of these early empires may point to a strategic tradition, fragmentary contemporary sources make a reconstruction of it extremely difficult. In any event, deep strategic reasoning seemed conspicuous by its absence when the Persians confronted Western opponents in the early fifth century B.C. There was little evidence of flexibility or long-term planning. Everything was predicated on the success of all-or-nothing assaults. The goal of war was simply to find the enemy army, challenge it, and defeat it decisively. The trouble was that even a temporary setback was unthinkable. A loss in battle would leave the Persians with no choice but to retreat, and one essence of strategy is the ability to fight another day.

In 490 B.C., a Persian naval expedition landed at Marathon, a little plain on the northeastern coast of Attica. The invaders thought (wrongly) that the population in that area would support the overthrow of the democratic Athenian government. The Persians established a beachhead and prepared for battle. The Athenians responded typically. Some 9,000 hoplites marched the twenty-six miles north to Marathon, formed up their phalanx, and charged the Persians. To everyone’s surprise, the numerically inferior Athenians made short work of their opponents. The Persians had made the fatal error of meeting the defenders on their own ground—the open plain, where their more heavily armored phalanx could march shield to shield. However, although the Athenian victory at Marathon was spectacular, it can hardly be attributed to strategic insight.

In 480 B.C. King Xerxes of Persia launched a massive second invasion, this time with an expeditionary force that was an interdependent triad of army, merchant marine, and navy. The army alone numbered several hundred thousand infantrymen and cavalry, according to conservative modern estimates. As it advanced across the Hellespont, through Thrace, and into Greece, it stuck to the coast. Being far too large to live off the land, it depended on resupply from the merchant marine’s grain ships. The merchant marine was defended by the navy, which in turn was defended by the army.

Early Greeks, like the hoplites in this drawing from a Corinthian vase, fought without strategy to resolve disputes.

The allied Greek states could not possibly meet this powerful force as if it were the army of another city-state. Because the traditional “no-strategy” response was self-evidently unworkable, the Greeks were constrained to come up with a defensive strategy or face obliteration. The high command finally decided on the simple expedient of holding the pass of Thermopylae just south of Thessaly, a narrow strip of beach between mountain and sea. The decision to defend Thermopylae was based on what can legitimately be called strategic analysis: the recognition that the Persians would have to stay near the coast for logistical reasons. Tactically, the narrow pass would neutralize the overwhelming Persian numerical advantage. But it was naive to hope that Xerxes would go home as soon as he ran into an obstacle. The pass-holding tactic failed when Xerxes learned of the existence of a side track that allowed him to get around the pass.

Once the Persians were beyond it, there was no hope of excluding them from central Greece. The allied Greek trireme navy withdrew to the straits of Salamis, off the coast of Athens, but the Greek high command was unsure how to proceed. The Spartans argued that the pass-defense approach should be tried again and advocated making a stand behind a makeshift defensive wall at the Isthmus of Corinth. The Athenians, led by the politician-general Themistocles, were not eager to try this because it meant permanently abandoning their home territory of Attica to the invader. Moreover, Themistocles saw that, given the superior Persian fleet, trying to hold the isthmus was unworkable. Many in the Peloponnesus would welcome Persian “liberation,” and the Persian ships would have little difficulty finding safe beaches. Spartan hegemony would crumble under the strain of Persian naval raids. Once Sparta’s Peloponnesian League fell apart, Greek resistance would collapse. Time was on the Persian side.

Themistocles saw one ray of hope: the vulnerability of the invaders’ interdependence of army, merchant marine, and
each of these commitments led Athens into large-scale and potentially dangerous confrontations.

The first of these involved the Egyptian revolt against Persia in the early 450s. The Athenians reasoned that it would be in their interest to support Egypt: An independent, pro-Athenian Egypt would fatally weaken Persia's position in the Mediterranean world, and access to Egypt's legendary wealth could help strengthen Athens's position as the lassocrat of the Aegean. Accordingly, a massive naval force—totaling some 200 ships—was quickly dispatched from Athens to aid the Egyptian rebels. Despite some initial successes, the ambitious expedition ended disastrously. According to Thucydides, all but a handful of the Athenians were wiped out by Persian counterattacks.

The Egyptian debacle demonstrated the dangers of overly hasty strategic planning and action: Initiatives that seem good in theory can be quickly undone by operational miscalculation. Meanwhile, undeterred, the Athenians were planning to wrest control of central mainland Greece from Sparta. Coordinated land and sea operations in Boeotia and Megara led to some successes, but the Peloponnesian hoplites retained their superiority in pitched battles, and the Athenians were forced to sign a peace treaty with Sparta in 446.

In 440, Athenian military forces were again stretched thin by the revolt of a key ally—the island polis of Samos. Another big expeditionary force was dispatched, but it took almost a year and a massive expenditure of cash to force Samos into surrender. The expedition clearly demonstrated the problems Athens would face if confronted by several simultaneous revolts of major city-states within the empire.

With a citizen (native adult male) population of around 40–50,000, fifth-century Athens was a remarkably large polis. But the military force that such a population could sustain was limited. If Athens failed to maintain its monopoly of the Aegean Sea, the empire would collapse—and with it Athens's status as a great power. The expeditions to Egypt and Samos demonstrated how very costly, in terms of men and money, maintaining that monopoly could be. The necessarily large Athenian manpower commitment to the navy meant that only limited numbers of soldiers could be detailed for operations on the mainland—which severely limited Athens's strategic options in this sphere. The Peloponnesian infantrymen were simply too numerous for Athens to deal with if the navy was to be kept up to strength.

Athens's manpower problem was the context for one of the most significant strategic choices of classical Greek history: the decision to build the "long walls" to connect the fortified city of Athens to the port town of Piraeus. Their construction, begun probably in the 450s B.C., meant that the city-harbor complex could function as a single fortress that could be resupplied by sea. This suggests that some Athenians had envisioned the possibility of a long-term defensive war in which resupply by sea would be essential to the city's survival. This sort of war would offer new strategic opportunities and pose new challenges.

In the mid-430s B.C., Pericles, general and political leader of democratic Athens, was confronted with a quandary. He believed that a major war with Sparta was inevitable—perhaps even desirable. But how could a navy of triremes be used to humble a land power that depended very little on trade? The conflict Pericles foresaw was that of "elephant versus whale"—and on the face of it, in this case the elephant would seem to hold the advantage. In a traditional agonistic war, Sparta and her allies would march into Athenian territory. The smaller, less well-trained Athenian army would march out to meet them and probably be defeated in the first year of the conflict. The Athenian navy would never become a factor.

Pericles determined to change this scenario. His plan was radical: Since the Spartans would win a war that was fought according to traditional Hellenic rules of engagement, Pericles reasoned that Athens might be able to win by breaking the rules. This was a key moment in the history of Greek strategic thought, the beginning of sophisticated, long-term, strategic analysis. Rather than worrying about tactics (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 invented grand strategy.

The key to success, in Pericles' plan, was for the Athenian army to avoid engagement with the Peloponnesian army. When challenged, the Athenians must refuse battle and remain within city walls. The Spartan–Peloponnesian invaders would not risk assaulting the walls, nor would they be likely to attempt an investment of the Athens–Piraeus complex. This would require a huge counterwall, and they could not spare the manpower to hold it. Finally, the Peloponnesians could not hope to starve the Athenians out. Athens's empire provided the revenues, and her "long walls" and navy the security, that allowed her merchantmen to resupply the city-fortress from grain markets in Egypt and southern Russia. Although the Athenians had by this time undertaken a few successful sieges, the Spartan–Peloponnesian invaders clearly lacked both the desire and the technical training necessary to undertake an extended siege of the great fortified Athenian complex.

Pericles' strategic assessment utilized what can fairly be called a Clausewitzian center-of-gravity analysis. He realized that the Athenian centers lay in the empire, as a source of revenue, and in the citizen population, as a source of naval power. The empire was adequately defended by the navy; the citizen population, by the walls. Since Sparta could not, using a traditional approach, endanger either empire or city, Athens was safe; she could not be decisively defeated in a defensive war. This meant that Athenian imperial policy must, for the duration of the war, remain conservative rather than expansionistic. Egypt and Samos had shown the potential costs of massive overseas campaigns.

Given her superiority and the assumption (which seemed reasonable at the time) that the war would last only a few years, the defensive side of Pericles' strategy was sound. Did he come up with a workable offensive plan? The ancient texts allow us to reconstruct the thinking of Athenian strategic planners only indirectly.

It is difficult to imagine how Athens, using naval power alone, could have
By September of 480 B.C., the Persian navy had suffered serious storm losses—but it was still much bigger and operationally superior to the Greek navy. In a battle on the open seas, the Persians would have an overwhelming tactical advantage. Themistocles concluded that the best hope for a Greek victory was to catch the Persian fleet in a narrow strait, where numbers and seamanship would count for less. The constricted waters of the straits of Salamis, where the Greek warships then were, would serve admirably. But how to convince the Persians to abandon their open-sea advantage? Themistocles hazarded a counterintelligence ruse: He sent a messenger to Xerxes claiming that he had decided to switch sides and offering the Persian king the chance to catch the entire Greek fleet by surrounding it in the straits of Salamis. Xerxes fell for the trick, and ordered his ships into the straits—and into the trap. Athenian ships disrupted the Persian line as it sailed around the little island of Psyttaleia in the middle of the straits. The two lines were soon hopelessly jammed. Heavily armed Greek boarding parties slaughtered Persian rowers, and a good part of the Persian navy, unable to disengage, was captured or sunk. The battle was a great victory for the Greeks, and Xerxes was compelled to withdraw the bulk of his army to Persia. The relatively small force that he left behind was defeated at the Battle of Plataea the following year.

The Persian Wars were fought outside the context of the hoplite agon, but with the exception of Themistocles’ insight into Persian operational vulnerability before the Battle of Salamis, there was little sophisticated strategic thought on either side. Xerxes appears to have assumed that victory would be assured by a gigantic combined force. Most of the Greek commanders were not able to see beyond the simplistic notion of holding a pass. The war was settled at Plataea in a set-piece battle on the open plains. Neither side was able consistently to look beyond the tactical issues of how to win a given battle to the strategic one of how to apply force efficiently over time in pursuit of a clearly articulated goal.

After the war the Athenians knew that the only hope for continued Greek independence was the maintenance of naval superiority in the Aegean Sea. Xerxes had been pushed back, but the Persian Empire was still strong. The formation in about 478 B.C. of the Athenian-led, anti-Persian alliance known as the Delian League was the indirect product of Themistocles’ strategic insight: No Persian navy meant no Persian invading army. The military operations and political organization of the league subsequently led to the development of more complex types of strategic thinking. But the league’s initial goal was quite straightforward: Patrol the Aegean and sink Persian ships. The basic plan was sound, and the Aegean soon became a Greek lake.

Yet the straightforward strategic logic on which the Delian League was founded disguised very real political complexities. For one thing, the ongoing military operations of the league required an appreciation of strategic realities considerably more sophisticated than the old “win a battle, win a war” point of view. After the first few years, the league navy found few Persians willing to fight. There were occasional big battles (e.g., at the EuryMedon River, circa 467 B.C.), but more often the year’s operations were routine naval patrols. The very idea of a standing naval force, one that would sail every season whether or not there were reports of enemy activity, was foreign to the agonistic spirit of earlier Greek warfare. The implicit strategy of the league was one of containment, and this too was foreign to the traditional Greek military mentality.

The Delian League was so successful militarily that within a decade or so of its founding, many Greeks ceased to regard the Persians as a significant threat. A few league member-states decided that its purpose was fulfilled and attempted to pull out, in order to avoid making sizable financial contributions to the defense effort. Athens, unquestioned leader of the league since its founding, used force to keep it intact. By about 450 B.C., the Delian League had become, in effect, the Athenian Empire, and this had major implications for Athenian military policy.

Athens’s new position as imperial hegemon required a yet more sophisticated strategic stance. Athenian military power was now supported by an Aegean-wide economic system, rather than by the territory of a single city-state. This meant that Athens could maintain a standing naval force much larger than that of any other Greek polis and could build up a sizable financial reserve—a factor of great importance in the era before organized credit and deficit spending. Furthermore, the duties faced by the Athenian armed forces were now multiple: to ensure that Persia stuck by the treaty agreement, to prevent—and when necessary to suppress—“liberation” movements among the allies, and, finally, to consolidate and extend Athenian influence on the mainland. In the middle decades of the fifth century B.C.,
hoped to overthrow Sparta. The Spartan center of gravity was her unique society of superbly trained citizen-soldiers, and the Peloponnesian League was the source of her land power. The Spartans and their Peloponnesian allies were unlikely to venture out to sea in numbers large enough to threaten their center. Pericles may reasonably have planned to use the navy to stir up rebellion. Sparta’s citizenry lived from the agricultural surplus generated by an oppressed, potentially restive lower class—the helots of Laconia (Sparta’s home territory) and Messenia (the southwestern peninsula of the Peloponnesus). With Sparta distracted by revolts, it may have been argued, the Peloponnesians would be stymied. But the Athenians established no base in Spartan territory during the first six years of the war. They launched periodic coastal raids beginning in 430 B.C., but it is unclear these had much effect.

It seems likely that Pericles’ offensive goal was limited: 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 in 458–457 (which they subsequently lost) by occupying the Megarian passes. 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 overthrowing Sparta, Pericles aimed at containing Sparta. This would have been an extension to the mainland of the strategic option that had worked well against the Persians.

The Spartans, for their part, probably had not adequately thought through the problems of a war with Athens, and they showed little strategic insight in the first years of the conflict. In the late 430s Sparta had no financial reserves and relatively little in the way of a navy. Although some may have had reservations about the war, the consensus among the high command apparently was that the war would be a traditional one, fought according to the ordinary rules of agonal combat.

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 outlying rural districts of Attica, took up residence in the city, and refused battle. Stymied, the Peloponnesians decamped a few weeks later, having accomplished virtually nothing. Once the Spartans and their allies were safely back in the Peloponnesus, Pericles sent the Athenian army into Megara, where it ravaged the 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, and the Megarians, excluded from Aegean trade by the Athenian fleet and hurt by agricultural losses, would have submitted to Athens. But, as Thucydides points out, war is filled with surprises for even the cleverest planner.

Some of the events of the war were truly unpredictable: In 430 a plague broke out in Athens, which within a few years had wiped out at least a quarter of the population, including Pericles himself. Other accidents of war seemed to favor Athens: In 425, some soldiers, sailing with an Athenian fleet that had reached during bad weather at Pylos, in Spartan-held Messenia, built a permanent base there from which to foment helot agitation against Sparta. Hundreds of Spartan hoplites who bungled an attack on the stronghold were captured and used as hostages against further incursions into Attica.

Concerned about the fate of the hostages if he should attack Attica directly, the Spartan general Brasidas devised the strategy of striking indirectly by attacking the Athenian Empire. In 424 he led a force into northern Greece and forced the capitulation of a number of important Athenian “allies.” Brasidas’s move demonstrated how an innovative strategic action on one side might lead to an innovative reaction on the other. Once the old rules of agonal conflict had been abandoned, the field was open to maneuver and countermaneuver.

Pericles’ grand strategy for winning the Peloponnesian War had been predicated on taking a strong defensive stance and maintaining strictly limited offensive goals. But after his death in 429 B.C., the Athenians found it difficult to stick to his austere plan. The result of their restlessness was a series of aggressive offensive operations, notably to Aetolia in northwestern Greece. This was an operational nightmare: The Athenian hoplites proved to be helpless in the mountains and forests against light-armed Aetolian skirmishers. It failed to cure Athens of the desire to expand, but it did teach an important lesson: Light-armed troops could be deadly in rugged terrain. The result was that light-armed mercenaries soon became part of the arsenal of the warring coalitions, another factor in an increasingly variegated strategic situation.

The second stage of the Peloponnesian War saw further advances in strategic thought. The first phase had ended in 420 with the signing of the Peace of Nicias, which left both Athens’s empire and Sparta’s Peloponnesian League more or less intact. Ten years of war had resolved nothing, and many Greeks were dissatisfied.

In 415 a brilliant, erratic, and charismatic politician-general named Alcibiades persuaded the Athenians to launch a massive naval invasion of the Greek city-state of Syracuse, on the island of Sicily. Syracuse, a colony of Corinth that had been established in the eighth century B.C., was the leading city-state in eastern Sicily. Overthrow of Syracuse might allow Athens to take over Sicily and the Greek towns of southern Italy as well. But it would be a very difficult undertaking. Thucydides’ account of the debate implies that the Athenian assembly had only the vaguest idea of Sicily’s size and resources. Furthermore, the invasion was certain to rekindle hostilities with Sparta.

The willingness of the Athenians to embark on the ill-fated Sicilian expedition can best be explained in terms of their insulation from the reality of Spartan power in the first stage of the war, a direct result of Pericles’ defensive strategy. Although the plague had been devastating, the Athenians had been otherwise safe behind their walls, and they
now saw no reason to fear a resumption of hostilities with such apparently ineffectual opponents. Furthermore, the Sicilian expedition demonstrates the growing Athenian taste for long-range (if muddy) strategic thinking: It marked a clear and irrevocable break with Pericles’ limited-aims strategy for the war. Total overthrow, rather than containment, of the enemy now became the policy goal. Alcibiades convinced the Athenians that by expanding the theater of the war, by gaining control of Sicily and southern Italy with their huge material and manpower bases, Athens could ultimately command enough men and resources to do this.

The Sicilian expedition was as ambitious as the Egyptian one that had ended in disaster four decades before: Some 5,100 hoplites (and smaller numbers of cavalry and other arms) were to be transported some 600 miles across the sea, convoyed by a navy of over 130 triremes. The target was a huge island, dominated by a city-state that was in many ways Athens’s mirror image: a large, wealthy, securely walled, democratic, imperialistic Greek polis with demonstrated abilities in both diplomacy and military operations. The Athenians were regarded by most western Greeks—even by many of Syracuse’s traditional enemies—as invaders. Athens would have to fight for every beachhead and could expect little cooperation from the Sicilians. Because of the logistical problems imposed by distance and by the scale of operations, the conduct of the expedition would have to be flawless in order for the grandiose strategic goal to be achieved. In the end, the invasion failed. Whether or not the strategy could have worked, given proper follow-through (and even the contemporary historian Thucydides is ambivalent on this point), in the hands of its commander, Nicias, it turned out to be an unprecedented disaster: Virtually the entire Athenian expeditionary force was wiped out.

Meanwhile, Alcibiades turned traitor and advised the Spartans on Athenian strategy and how to counter it. The Spartans were then able to begin to solve the problem of a foe who refused to fight in the open field, by manning, in 413, a permanent base in Attica, trapping most Athenians inside their city year-round—except for those who came and went by ship. With the Athenians effectively under siege, the Spartans could focus their energies on defeating their navy.

The Spartans saw that, given the Athenians’ dependence on food imports, breaking their sea power would end the war. Sparta would have to build her own navy—an expensive proposition—but a willing source of cash was available: the king of Persia, who hoped that by breaking Athens he could regain control of the rich towns of Ionia. Once again, Athenian strategic initiative (expanding the theater of war to Sicily) was matched by a Spartan counterinitiative (expanding their revenue base to include Persian coffers). With their Persian-funded fleet, the Spartans went after the Athenian navy and empire; the primary theater of combat shifted to the northern Aegean. The Athenians managed to defeat a Spartan fleet in 410, but Sparta’s navy was not her center of gravity. With more Persian money the Spartans rebuilt, and their admirals learned from previous operational errors.

In strategic terms, the stakes were now much higher for Athens than for Sparta. If Athens lost a major engagement and was (even temporarily) unable to defend her merchant fleet, her civilian population would starve and the war would be over. If Sparta lost an engagement at sea, it meant relatively little. Thus, Spartan admirals were able to take the sort of risky tactical initiatives that their Athenian counterparts no longer dared.

The resourceful Spartan admiral Lysander played on the timidity of the joint Athenian naval command, now centered at Aegospotami in the north Aegean, by constantly threatening battle and then withdrawing his warships. The Athenians were unwilling either to pursue their foe or to abandon their exposed defensive position, located dangerously far from a good base of supply. In the end Lysander wore down their guard and launched a surprise attack that captured most of the Athenian ships on the beach. With the Athenian fleet smashed, the all-important maritime supply lines were cut. Worn down by famine, Athens surrendered to Sparta in 404 B.C.

The Peloponnesian War opened the Pandora’s box of war fought according to rational strategic calculation. Greek generals of the fourth century, most notably Philip II and his son Alexander III of Macedon, devised sophisticated strategic initiatives that united diplomatic maneuvers, employment of spies and traitors, exploitation of instate class discord, economic coercion, superior siegecraft, and year-round campaigning by professional armies. The long-term result was Philip’s defeat of a city-state coalition at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C. and the end of the era of city-state dominance in Greece. Strategic insight (notably his plan to neutralize the Persian navy by capturing all of Persia’s Mediterranean ports) allowed Alexander to conquer Persia. After his death, Alexander’s generals carved Greece and western Asia into the empires of the Hellenistic period. These self-proclaimed kings and their successors were unhampered by either formal rules of war or democratic political processes and so could secretly devise and execute plans for mutual subversion and annihilation. Thus, their strategic sophistication contributed to disunity and weakness, paving the way for the Roman conquest of the Greek world.

After the end of the fifth century B.C., though hoplite battles remained important tactically, there was no possibility of a return to the prestrategic forms of conflict resolution. The Peloponnesian War showed that engaging in battle could be a rational decision, rather than a ritual duty, and that an enemy who refused battle might be decisively defeated by an indirect attack on his economic means of survival. In place of the strictly circumscribed conflict of the agon—which tested national strength but limited casualties to armed warriors and minimized economic and social damage—Western culture had embarked on a path soon to be strewn with ruined national economies, shattered social values, and the bodies of untold numbers of combatants and noncombatants alike.