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The Report

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Proxy Wars From Sparta to Ukraine and Gaza

Paul Rahe, a scholar of ancient military history, finds contemporary parallels. But where's our Gylippus?

By Tunku Varadarajan
Nov. 17, 2023, WSJ

ILLUSTRATION: KEN FALLIN

Hillsdale, Mich.

Paul Rahe is one of the world's top scholars of ancient military history. When we meet, he wants to talk about war in the present tense: Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Hamas pogrom in Israel and China's covetous eye on Taiwan.

Mr. Rahe, 74, is a professor of history and Western heritage at Hillsdale College, a private liberal-arts school 100 miles west of Detroit. He likens Vladimir Putin's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine to Athens's attempt to conquer Sicily from 415-13 B.C. And he says it makes as much sense for the U.S. to back Ukraine as it did for the Spartans to help Sicily—which is to say, it's a no-brainer.

For Mr. Rahe, antiquity isn't merely academic. Embedded within it are maps that can help us sidestep present-day minefields and steer us toward common sense and smart strategy. These are qualities he finds in short supply on America's "isolationist right," in whose ranks he includes Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy. (He admits of Mr. Trump that "I held my nose and voted for him in 2020.")

Mr. Rahe believes that the Athenian and Russian invasions, 2,436 years apart, were both acts of "madness" and "greedy overreach" as well as expressions of "an erotic desire for grandeur." The aggressors not only scorned the resolve of their targets—the Syracusans of Sicily and the Ukrainians, respectively—but also overestimated their own "capacities and chances of success." For the Athenian leaders, the allure of Sicily was so great that they ignored "logistical difficulties of waging war on an island 800

nautical miles away." Mr. Putin "didn't ever ask himself what could go wrong."

Mr. Rahe, whose Finnish name is pronounced RAY, has just published "Sparta's Sicilian Proxy War," his fifth book on that Greek city-state. A sixth book on Sparta is already in press, he says almost apologetically. His preoccupation with Sparta began at Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar in the early 1970s. He wants his latest book to be read not simply by an ever-shrinking tribe of Hellenists at anglophone universities but also by policy makers who shape world affairs. He would like them to learn to appreciate the strategic utility of proxy wars. "Why can't they see that the United States is fighting just such a war against Russia in Ukraine?" he says. "And they're fighting it on the cheap. It's just like Sparta used the Sicilians as proxies to cripple the old enemy Athens by 413 B.C."

Proxy wars are a great bargain because they can cost so little. Hamas's invasion of Israel on Oct. 7, says Mr. Rahe, "was a proxy war, sure. Who trained them? Who planned it? Who funds Hamas? The Iranians. What does it cost the Iranians, a little bit of money?" How many Iranian soldiers died? "Probably next to none. They're doing it cut-price, and they gain an enormous amount because they've got the entire Arab world up in arms over this."

From an Iranian perspective, he says, "it's brilliant. There was an alliance forming between Israel and the Sunni Arab states against Iran. That alliance is now in question, not because the Arab leaders have any sympathy for Hamas at all, but because of the Arab Street."

History repeats itself: "There's nothing known to grand strategists today that Thucydides hadn't already worked out." The first great historian, Thucydides would have grasped right away why the U.S. backs Ukraine with political support and military equipment. But Mr. Rahe thinks he'd have wondered why the support isn't full-bore. When your rival "gets enmeshed in a war with another power, shouldn't you provide that other power with all the means to bleed your rival?"

Proxy wars are the result of a politico-military impasse, Mr. Rahe says. History "is no stranger to enduring strategic rivalries in which neither power can deliver a knockout blow to the other." Athens and Sparta are the first significant example. Rome and Carthage were exquisitely stalemated a short while later, as were England and France in the 18th century and the U.S. and the Soviet Union for nearly half a century after World War II.

That last conflict has resurfaced as the West grapples with Mr. Putin's revanchist Russia. The competition with China for global supremacy guarantees a strategic stalemate for the ages, unless there's a conflagration over Taiwan.

Stalemate doesn't mean paralysis, Mr. Rahe makes clear. "So, what do you do in situations like that? You can bleed your opponent if they foolishly, or out of necessity, get into a war with a third power—even a small power—in circumstances where you can supply that power with what they need to fight." That doesn't have to be done covertly—as in Ukraine, "it's usually apparent."

Sparta's intervention in Sicily was remarkable. It took the form of a single general, Gylippus, who was smuggled into Sicily on a Corinthian boat in 414 B.C. He was a *mothax,* meaning of mixed (and socially inferior) heritage: His father was Spartan and his mother a *helot,* or serf. "Within a week of arriving," Mr. Rahe, says, Gylippus "stiffened Sicilian resolve with his generalship to such an extent that he turned the tide of the war decisively against Athens." It didn't help that Athens had a severe manpower shortage, having lost a large proportion of its population in a plague in 427 B.C. Rarely in history "has a power gained so much at so little cost through the efforts of a single man."

Cut to Ukraine. The U.S. has stiffened Ukrainian resolve with a supply of advanced weaponry that has hit the Russian army hard. European countries have joined the effort, "some more enthusiastically than others, even as it should be acknowledged that our own supply of weapons has been unimpressive."

Yet he thinks U.S. politicians, even those who support Ukraine, have been too risk-averse. "Are there dangers in a proxy war?" he says. "Yes, sure, you can get drawn into it and then your people begin to die." Asked for an example, he says: "It's called the American Revolution. It was a proxy war of the French, the Dutch and the Spanish. They wanted to knock the Brits down." But the French "got drawn in.

At the Battle of Yorktown there were more French than American troops."

The American Revolution "was a great victory for France. But there was a price to pay. It's called the French Revolution," which was brought on in part by the fiscal ruin that resulted from overreach in projecting power.

"Some people argue that we've got the same problem now in the U.S.," Mr. Rahe says, "and that the price of our bleeding Russia may be a breakdown of our economic system. I don't happen to agree with them."

The Cold War was a series of proxy wars, starting with Korea and Vietnam, where "the Chinese began but the Russians had more resources. It was very effective, and did us enormous damage. The American army was a mess after Vietnam." The U.S. was able to "return the favor in Afghanistan, and that, arguably, brought down the Soviet regime." Losing Afghanistan "was particularly humiliating because of the ideological commitments of the Soviet Union. Communism can never fail. It can never withdraw. Once a country is socialist, it's socialist forever." Withdrawal from Afghanistan was "unthinkable," but "they ended up having to do it."

Is President Biden a modern-day Gylippus in his defense of Ukraine? The question makes Mr. Rahe laugh out loud. "It's hard to think of him in those terms," he says. "If anything, it was [Volodymyr] Zelensky." The Ukrainian president famously refused a U.S. offer to evacuate him from Kyiv, saying, "I need ammunition, not a ride." That "put Biden in an impossible position. After the withdrawal from Afghanistan, he couldn't be humiliated by a brave Ukrainian patriot wanting to defend his country and asking for help. Zelensky drove Biden."

Mr. Rahe regrets that the West is fighting a "half-hearted" proxy war in Ukraine, but he

says it’s better than not fighting at all. He also cautions against arguments by foreign-policy “realists” like John Mearsheimer that the Ukraine crisis is the West’s fault and that aiding Ukraine has driven Russia into China’s arms. Russia “was already solidly aligned with China,” Mr. Rahe says. He contends that realists “ignore Russian political culture, and ignore the fact that it will never be ‘saturated’ ”—a term Otto von Bismarck coined to describe a country that feels it has enough territory and therefore enough swagger.

Is the war in Ukraine also a proxy war for Beijing? “Well, you could argue, if you looked at it from a Chinese perspective, that getting the Americans to expend resources in Ukraine strengthens China.” But Mr. Rahe thinks that would be counterproductive for the Chinese, inasmuch as it has galvanized Japan. “The Japanese response to the Ukraine war is to double its military budget,” he says. The Japanese have recognized “that wars have not been abolished and that we’ve gone through a 30-year period of delusion since the end of the Cold War.” Japan could acquire nuclear weapons and “will go nuclear if China moves on Taiwan.” The southernmost islands of Japan, he points out, are “closer to Taiwan than the Chinese ports are. Furthermore, the Japanese are also psychologically close to Taiwan.”

Mr. Rahe has a message to Republicans like Messrs. Trump and Ramaswamy: “Listen to the Europeans. Listen to the Estonians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles, Czechs and Romanians. Listen to the Swedes and the Finns, who were neutral during the Cold War. They think this is highly significant.” If Russia isn’t stopped in Ukraine, it may advance farther, drawing the U.S. in through its obligations under the NATO treaty. And “all the talk about the money we’re sending over, that’s cheap rhetoric. We’re not sending very much at all, in terms of our overall budget.”

As for Mr. DeSantis, Mr. Rahe thinks he’d “sober up in office.” He will see that “the first function of government is national defense, and that America’s longstanding policy is that if there’s going to be fighting, we don’t want it here. We want it over there. America’s defense perimeter? We want it way out there.” A proxy war in Eastern Europe is better than a war in North America. It’s time for us to think like spartans.

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at New York University Law School’s Classical Liberal Institute.

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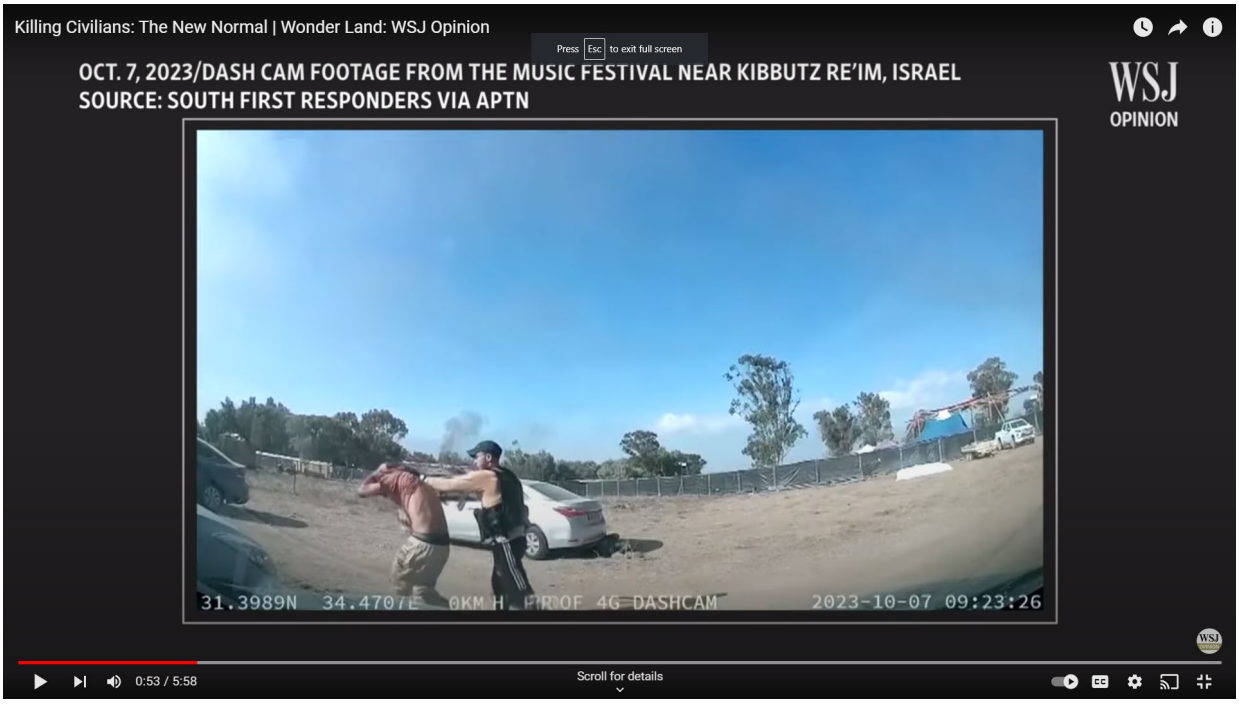
HAMAS TERRORIST GOVERNMENT, MURDERING CIVILIAN ISRAELI'S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VIEW FROM THE US CONGRESS

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Pace et Salute...JP

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