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Makers of Ancient Strategy: From the Persian Wars to the Fall of Rome

edited by Victor Davis Hanson

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In *Makers of Ancient Strategy: from the Persian Wars to the Fall of Rome*, prolific historian Victor David Hansen provides a prequel to the 1986 classic *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. He joins a cohort of historians who have recently sought relevant insight to present conflicts from the sometimes opaque accounts of how Greeks and Romans made strategy and wars in antiquity. Hansen is the Anderson Senior Fellow in Classics and Military History at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and a syndicated columnist for Tribune Media Services. Much like its predecessor, most of this volume's contributors have written noteworthy accounts of aspects of war, in this case the classical world.

What Hansen seeks in this anthology is to explore "the most ancient examples of our heritage to frame questions of the most recent manifestations of Western Warfare." He argues that the classical world offers a unique ability in understanding war in any era due to the unchanging human nature which drives conflict. Hansen warns that, unlike the abstract thinkers who have made modern strategy, ancient strategy is more often implicit in the empirical writings of the classical authors and requires more supposition. In addition, due to the reduction of technological impact on strategy, the classical world offers seemingly novel solutions which may assist current strategic leaders in making better choices.

The book's first six chapters are short and readable accounts of selected aspects of the Greek wars. Tom Holland leads off with "From Persia with Love," which presents the Greco-Persian Wars of Herodotus from a fresh perspective of the Persian Empire. The Greeks and their "Western Way of War" defeated the "Persian Way of War" that relied on propaganda, turncoats, and a mass levy of the empire's subjects. The benefits of the early Athenian Empire in maintaining security and fostering economic growth, before hubris and strategic overreach doomed it, are analyzed by Donald Kagan in "Pericles, Thucydides, and the Defense of Empire." In one of the weakest chapters, David Berkey presents "Why Fortifications Endure" with respect to the diverse economic, political, and military agendas that led to the walls of Athens. In addition to serving as the editor and preparing the introduction, Hansen presents a new perspective on a relevant, contemporary topic in describing the defeat of Sparta and the spread of democratic governments by "Epaminodas the Theban and the Doctrine of Preemptive War." Ian Worthington follows with the cautionary case

of “Alexander the Great, Nation-Building, and the Creation and Maintenance of Empire.” This timely tale reviews the

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misleading ease of initial Western military defeat of inferior indigenous forces with the difficulty of administering conquered lands with renewed and amorphous centers of resistance. Completing the Greek section is a disappointing chapter by John W. I. Lee, “Urban Warfare in the Classical Greek World.” Not

only does he exclude numerous Roman examples of urban combat (Carthage, Alesia, Jerusalem), but he stays at a tactical level and fails to adequately address the issue of the strategic necessity of urban warfare.

The next four chapters focus on Roman warfare. Susan Mattern provides a thought-provoking perspective in “Counterinsurgency and the Enemies of Rome.” She submits that Rome endured for a long time not only because of overall military superiority and punitive operations, but because it offered social and economic benefits to powerful elements in subject territories. Barry Stauss in “Slave Wars of Greece and Rome” places the revolt of Spartacus and other slave insurrections in a strategic context. He concludes that despite the terror these servile insurgencies invoked, the insurgents were doomed to failure when the state responded in all its armed might. Next, Adrian Goldsworthy presents a distilled version of his larger work in “Julius Caesar and the General as State.” Goldsworthy argues that Caesar’s greatness was irrevocably entwined with his army, and that Caesar, by charismatically maintaining the army’s loyalty, overrode its duty to the state. Peter Heather’s last chapter, “Holding the Line,” presents his provocative view that Rome didn’t really collapse but, due to Roman strategic policy, blended over time with the Barbarians.

Though the book is of high overall quality, Hansen as editor curiously fails to remain focused on ancient strategy despite the name of the book. While several of the chapters stray considerably from the strategic theme to focus more on individuals, none cover some other famous classical strategists—Hannibal, Scipio Africanus, Augustus, Trajan, or Marcus Aurelius. In addition, Hansen is unabashed in focusing only on what he has written almost extensively about—the Western Way of Warfare—not Asian or Middle Eastern ancient warfare; he also shows a bias toward the Greeks rather than the Romans. Regardless, *Makers of Ancient Strategy* is a must for readers interested in strategy during antiquity or for a 21st Century perspective of the strategic parallels between today and the classical Greeks and Romans.