

DEVELOPING THE WESTERN WAY OF WAR:
ANCIENT GREEK WARFARE AND HANSON'S "WESTERN WAY OF WAR" THESIS

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In *A War Like No Other*, Victor Davis Hanson points out, “our present-day notion of Western discipline—marching in time, advancing and retreating on command, preservation of formation, and mutual protection within files and ranks—started with the Greek phalanx.”¹ This statement bears witness to Hanson’s assertion that the ancient Greeks developed a style of warfare that has been passed down through the centuries and serves as the forefather of today’s Western military. To illustrate this, Hanson explains that the ancient confrontations of the Peloponnesian War were not unlike confrontations during World War II, the Cold War, and in Vietnam. In the Peloponnesian War, and in the modern conflicts, alliances were gathered together, superpowers vied for economic and military superiority, and crusaders spread their democratic or imperial ideals.² From the early accounts of Greek warfare described in the *Iliad*, Greek military tactics slowly evolved. This evolution created a new form of comprehensive warfare that has been passed down through the generations to become what Hanson terms the “Western way of war.” While Western warfare today is certainly different from ancient Greek warfare, the battle strategies of long ago foreshadow today’s Western warfare and provide a blueprint for the successful warfare of the modern West. Rather than simply employing one type of warrior in a brief engagement, the Western way of war is an unrelenting affair that combines multiple types of soldiers, sailors, and tactics to reach a decisive victory that protects the homeland, expands economic opportunity, showcases power, and either maintains or spreads national values.

Thucydides wrote, “war...is a violent teacher.”³ The Greeks learned from their successes and failures from the time of the Trojan War through the time of the Peloponnesian War, and

¹ Victor Davis Hanson, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Random House, 2005), 138-139.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Thuc. 3.82.2.

their style of warfare evolved into something resembling Western warfare. This learning process, however, took centuries. The majority of the combatants in Bronze Age battles would have been farmers eager to protect their homesteads. Those fighting away from home, like those who fought in the Trojan War, fought at the direction powerful warlord kings to secure access to valuable resources, seize control of lucrative trade markets, and to eliminate military rivals. Other warriors were likely young adventurers, seeking fame and riches through plunder. Homer wrote of battles dominated by noble men with nearly superhuman strength, who often fought in individual combat. The seasoned warrior Menelaus fought against the unprepared Paris to avenge the “theft” (if in fact she left unwillingly) of Helen. Achilles fought with the skill of a demigod against Hector, killing him and almost single-handedly swaying the tide of the war in favor of the Greeks. Odysseus, when he returned from his years of wandering, likewise exhibited god-like cunning, strength, and skill when he slew the “pretenders” who had squandered his estate in his absence. Everett Wheeler, in contrast with Hanson’s thesis, identifies Homeric combat, not the hoplite phalanx, as the beginning of the Western way of war. Wheeler’s explanation stems from what he terms the “Achilles ethos” and the “Odysseus ethos,” the difference between chivalric face-to-face confrontation in open battle and the deceitful trickery of indirect and unequal battle.⁴ Hanson’s view of the Western way of war focuses on changes in warfare that came much later than Homer.

As democracy began to flower in Athens during the centuries following the Trojan War and the Dark Ages that followed, a new aim of warfare was introduced: to fight, as a volunteer

⁴ Everett L. Wheeler, review of *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* by Victor Davis Hanson, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 21, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 124, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/204922> (Accessed February 25, 2014).

under the consent of the governed, to protect the freedom which democracy provided.⁵ As democracy took shape, so did the hoplite and the hoplite's primary formation, the phalanx. To employ this new formation, the phalanx required soldiers to trade in their two or three javelins for a single, long, and heavy spear, which would give the phalanx the power to smash into opposing armies and break their ranks.⁶ This up-close fighting was a change from Homeric warfare in which the javelin, a range weapon, was primary. Odysseus, when he battled the pretenders, employed bronze-tipped spears as his primary weapon.⁷ With the development of the hoplite phalanx, the focus on individual feats of greatness as described by Homer were replaced with the valor of the corporate whole and the brilliance of successful commanders as described by Herodotus and Thucydides. Individuality in battle was negated by the necessary commitment to the body of soldiers pushing in the phalanx. The hoplite of ancient Greece was, like Western warriors today, a citizen soldier. Like soldiers in the United States or Europe, a hoplite appreciated the value of the land he owned, the freedoms his lifestyle provided, and the teamwork and camaraderie of the military formation. Unlike the mercenaries and conscripts employed by Persia and other enemies, the hoplite fought to defend his own property and way of life. In this way, the development of the hoplite phalanx was instrumental in shaping Hanson's Western way of war concept.

Decisive Greek battles, such as at Marathon and Salamis during the Persian Wars and Delium and Mantinea during the Peloponnesian War, can be compared with modern battles, such as the Battle of Saratoga during the American Revolution and the Battle of Midway during

⁵ Woody West, "The Western Way of War," review of *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* by Victor Davis Hanson, *Policy Review* 110 (December 2001), <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/7100> (Accessed February 25, 2014).

⁶ A. M. Snodgrass, "The Hoplite Reform and History," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 85 (1965): 111, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/628813> (accessed May 12, 2013).

⁷ Hom. Od. 22.125.

World War II. These battles were great turning points that showed, as Hanson's Western way of war theory contends, the resolve of citizen soldiers fighting to defend their homeland and way of life. Hanson maintains, however, that while such battles are important indicators of the beginnings of Western-style warfare, decisive battles do not necessarily guarantee victory in war.⁸ Athens crushed Sparta at Pylos and Sphacteria, but was unable (or unwilling) to secure a favorable end to the Peloponnesian War. In fact, Hanson all but dispels the idea that a decisive battle was the key element of Greek warfare and, by extension a key element of the Western way of war, through several examples in *A War Like No Other*. For example, Hanson contends that the Greeks won the Persian Wars through a combination of hoplite battles, light-armed raids and ambushes, and by destroying the Persian navy at Artemisium and Salamis, not by pitched hoplite battles alone. It was not only the hoplites that won the war, but rather it was a more complete and across-the-board effort that beat the Persians. The same held true during the Peloponnesian War. For example, Hanson stated, "it was Sicilian horsemen, not hoplites, that most harmed the Athenian army."⁹ Thus, while the hoplite was a tremendous improvement over Homeric warfare and a step forward toward the Western way of war, the hoplite phalanx does not appear to be the end of the line for Hanson's thesis.

Greek warfare seems to have changed during the intervening years between the Trojan War and the Peloponnesian War. The philosopher Socrates lamented that fighting during the Peloponnesian War "empowered a landless naval crowd at the expense of proud landowning hoplites." Furthermore, it "inaugurated a type of fighting...that divorced virtue from military efficacy."¹⁰ A shift was underway. This shift took the burden of warfare from citizen farmers

⁸ Hanson, 146.

⁹ Ibid., 147.

¹⁰ Ibid.

who needed to wrap up a campaigning season to harvest crops at home and placed warfare in the hands of those who had no such encumbrances. Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote, “Theirs not to make reply, / Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die.”¹¹ This famous sentence from “The Charge of the Light Brigade” illustrates the point that the Western way of war is not restricted to preannounced battles fought by nobility according to “rules of war.” Rather, the Western way of war is unencumbered warfare waged by fighters prepared to die if necessary. Even Thucydides, according to Hanson, lamented the fact that both Athens and Sparta fought using ambushes and raids because neither side would march out to fight a battle in the “formal” way.¹² Rather than pitched battles in open fields, which Herodotus believe was an absurd way to fight, this new form of warfare was different.¹³ It was fought on rough ground and mountain passes. It used hoplite heavy infantrymen, but it also used cavalry, light-armed troops, archers, mobile javelin throwers, sailors, and marines. Where Homeric warfare involved nobles with money to purchase greaves, helmets, and swords, this new style of warfare involved soldiers who were often supplied with weapons by their city-state. These soldiers and sailors could be rich, poor, free, slave, citizen, or foreigner. All could fight to protect or to spread the ideals of the city-state.

In modern Western militaries, a wide array of tactics and types of soldier are employed to reach victory. Ships control waterways and deliver marines to the battlefield. Special forces soldiers and spies are employed for sensitive operations and to gain intelligence. Infantry soldiers and tanks (the cavalry) establish a ground presence and take control of key land objectives. Air power is used to knock out enemy communications and bases of operation. Warfare in the West

¹¹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” Poetry Foundation, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174586> (accessed March 8, 2014).

¹² Hanson, 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 124.

is a comprehensive effort of an entire spectrum of military personnel and resources. In addition, modern Western warriors are often professionals who are well supplied by their mother country. They, like their ancient counterparts from Athens and Sparta, are relentless, inventive, adaptable, and rooted in their mission. Hanson argues that the beginnings of this Western way of war originate in ancient Greece. The Greeks built this military method over many centuries, and Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides appear to corroborate Hanson's argument. We have inherited and improved upon this military method, and we will likely pass it on once again to those who are yet to come.

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