Naval War College Review

1996

The Role of Strategy in Great Power Decline

Peter J. Woolley

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review

The Role of Strategy in Great Power Decline

Peter J. Woolley

In former times, military power was isolated, with the consequence that
victory or defeat appeared to depend upon the accidental qualities of the
commanders. In our day, it is common to treat economic power as the
source from which all other kinds are derived; this, I shall contend, is just
as great an error. . . .

Bertrand Russell,
Power, a New Social Analysis, 1938

T HE TRANSFORMATION OF WORLD ORDER is commonly linked to
the decline of one or more great powers and the rise of others. The cause
of the decline of great powers and the rise of their successors is of special interest
to social scientists and others who seek to identify patterns in history. It is also
of interest to attentive citizens and to policy makers who wish to avoid what are
perceived to be the mistakes of the past. Therefore, analyses of great-power
decline must eventually focus on more than economic mega-trends, abstract
models, or mere correlations as explanations for decline, else there be scant room
for policy prescription and little to be harvested for the use of either statesmen
or citizens.

This article argues that at the root of at least some transformations of world
order lies politico-military strategy, and that faulty strategy contributed greatly
to the decline of certain great powers and consequently transformed world
orders. It argues generally that there is a great deal more to be learned from the

Dr. Woolley is associate professor of comparative politics at Fairleigh Dickinson
University, Madison, New Jersey. In 1995 he was an Advanced Research Scholar at the
Naval War College's Center for Naval Warfare Studies. The author wishes to thank
Professors John B. Hattendorf, Director of the Advanced Research Department, and
George W. Baer, Chairman of the Strategy and Policy Department, for their gracious
encouragement and critical comments.

Naval War College Review, Winter 1996, Vol. XLIX, No. 1

study of comparative strategy than from the invention of models, and, more specifically, that human choice is more relevant than historical inevitability to present-day concerns of the United States.

Contending Theories of Decline and Transformation

Political scientists have made heroic attempts to explain the decline of great powers and the transformation of world order. However, many of these focus less on politico-military strategy than on general, sometimes inexorable and uncontrollable, trends that seem simply to inundate or undermine a great power. A brief review and critique of two such "declinist" works will highlight the difference between analysis based on such broad trends and that which emphasizes strategy.

Among the best known declinist works are Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* and Robert Gilpin's *War and Change*.[1] There are other persuasive theories of decline, but these two are especially worth examining because they illuminate fundamental problems in the search for the causal links of decline.

Much of the debate generated in 1987 by Paul Kennedy's thesis centered on the idea of "imperial overreach."[2] Kennedy's observation, which he emphasized was very general, was that great powers can expect to suffer an erosion of their economic base, resulting in a telling disadvantage in wartime.[3] The problem might arise from uneven benefits of technological breakthroughs, overinvestment in security at the expense of more productive enterprise, sheer serendipity, or poor planning; but the pattern has always been the same—a relative decline in economic power leading eventually to real decline in military and political strength. Great nations accumulate more defense commitments than their economic bases can sustain, and they lose.

Robert Gilpin had earlier presented a somewhat similar explanation, in his 1982 book. Gilpin suggested that a profound imbalance between ends and means was the hallmark of a state's decline; to explain this imbalance and its consequences, Gilpin proposed a somewhat organic approach. That is, dominant states necessarily "attempt to extend their dominion to the limits of their economic, military, and other capabilities";[4] eventually, these hegemonic states overextend themselves, placing their empire and resources in "disequilibrium." Conflict results as a dominant state attempts to maintain its position against new challengers. Thus "hegemonic conflict . . . leads to the creation of a new international order," and the cycle of extension, overextension, decline, war, and transformation begins anew.[5]

Underlying Assumptions. Embedded and implicit in the work of the declinist theorists are fundamental assumptions, postulates that lead specifically away from the comparative study of strategy.

Kennedy apparently assumes, as many of his reviewers have pointed out, that all great powers can reasonably be placed in a single category.[6] Putting the question "How do great powers decline as great powers?," he examines the historical record—an approach that, given this preconception, naturally inclines one to find a common factor. Autocratic, despotic, and authoritarian powers are considered alongside democratic, constitutional, and republican polities. Ming China, the Ottoman Empire, Tokugawa Japan, the Soviet Union, and the Spanish, French, and Hapsburg empires are lumped together with Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States. Such vastly different countries and situations can have only a rather low common denominator. Indeed, Kennedy insists in his preface that he did not intend to offer "rules" governing world systems, stating his thesis with utmost caution: "The historical record suggests that there is a . . . correlation *in the long run.*"[7] The result—necessarily very broad and applicable only over long sweeps of time—may well be of little use to a strategist who has near-term choices to make and their consequences to live with.

In Gilpin's analysis, the "given" is historical inevitability: hegemonic war is the final manifestation of a change in the world order. The dominant power, progressively undermined by factors that, conversely, strengthen its rivals, attempts to maintain its position by violence; eventually this aggressive policy, meant to maintain the status quo, leads to general war. The adverse trends that have effectively brought on the war now ineluctably cause the collapse of the hegemonic power. In this schema the dominant power goes to war precisely to halt the erosion of its stature, only to find that its strength is too diminished and the burden of war too great; it cannot win. In effect, it is the transformation of the world system that brings on the war: the war ratifies the change.

Here again, there is little to learn of possible choices and their implications. War in Gilpin's view is born of a decline already well advanced; the hegemonic power inevitably goes to war and must lose. The process is almost mechanical, and the outcome unavoidable.

Alternative Assumptions. We may, however, consciously essay different postulates. By contrast to Kennedy's work, let us posit that great powers are not in every important way alike and that the reasons for their declines vary. *Pace* Gilpin, let us assume that war and—if war comes—its outcome are not inevitable. New worlds for exploration now open up, particularly in comparative strategy, which is the side-by-side study of states' political choices in selecting and matching ends to resources, abilities, and military means in the international arenas of their time.

Let us begin by distinguishing among types of great powers. For example, to describe the United States so as to be able to identify comparable historical cases, we would give its fundamental characteristics as democratic governance, an extraordinary volume of internal and external trade, an economy highly developed compared to other nations, a first-rate military establishment, and a maritime orientation (long warm-water littorals, a great navy capable of projecting power, emphasis on freedom of the seas, and a large volume of seaborne trade). Great powers essentially *dis*similar (for some purposes) to the United States would have as few as *one* of the following: an authoritarian government, a centrally controlled or poorly functioning economy, or a primary reliance upon land power. Such distinctions put a great many polities in a category other than that of the United States; they narrow down the cases that might be usefully compared, and they help sharpen our focus as we search for shared reasons for decline.

We further assume, in contrast to Gilpin, that a major war marking the end of a power's dominance is not inevitable, and that its outcome, if it occurs, is not simply a function of an insuperable imbalance between the unrealistic goals and declining capabilities of that power. Instead, the avoidance, or outbreak and conduct, of war may be seen as resulting from choices—choices with consequences that we can examine and learn from. These alternative assumptions put us in the realm of comparative strategy, the value of which can be suggested by a series of brief case studies.

Three great powers similar in fundamental ways to the United States were Periclean Athens, the Venetian Republic before the discovery of the New World, and nineteenth-century Britain. They, like the United States, were first-rate military powers, commercial and politically open entities that relied heavily upon their navies and seaborne trade. They were *commercial* powers in that they nurtured prosperous, largely decentralized domestic markets and depended heavily on trade; *maritime* powers, maintaining first-class navies and looking overseas for prosperity and security; *military* powers by virtue of armed forces drawing upon great wealth and exerting direct or indirect influence over foreign countries; and, finally, they were *open* (even if not, by the most exacting modern definition, democratic)—open to public debate, to organized public pressure, to meritorious advancement, to alternations in ruling elites, and to new ideas. The dominance of each of the three came to an end in a major war fought against a land power; an examination of their strategic choices reveals important insights for others in their class, including, most notably, the United States.

The Dénouement of Periclean Athens

Four factors stand out in the failure of Athenian strategy in the fifth century B.C.: mistreatment of allies; an imprudent and disastrous campaign in Sicily; a chronic lack of adequate ground forces; and diplomatic policies that brought the Persians, expelled from Greece in 479, back into Hellenic politics.

This is not to say that no adverse trends impinged on Athenian power and on the decisional latitude of its leadership in the Periclean Age. Many factors contributed to the end of Athenian hegemony in Greece, among them a poor endowment of natural resources (with the notable exceptions of silver and marble); over-reliance on imports of foreign grain and other raw materials; enormous pressure for public spending; and all against the background of an earlier debilitating defeat in Egypt in 454 B.C. Those inclined to focus on the damaging consequences of these influences find support in a number of persuasive historical narratives. Donald Kagan, for example, writes that "before the Egyptian disaster, the return of Megara to the Spartan alliance, and the oligarchic rebellions in central Greece, Athens had the prospect of an inexhaustible grain supply, enormous wealth, control of central Greece, and absolute security against invasion. All of that was lost by 445, and Athens was incomparably weaker on the eve of the Peloponnesian War than she had been at her acme in the early 450's."[8]

We might easily conclude from this passage that Athens overextended itself, that the end of its empire had been plainly in sight before the Peloponnesian War, itself the last gasp of a failing hegemony. But in that case how could Athenian strategists have ignored these signs? What did they intend to accomplish? Let us focus on some specific failures of Athenian leadership.

Athens and the Allies. Among the most serious failures was the treatment of allies. The Delian League, which Athens headed, started out well enough; it was a voluntary organization, its members invited Athens to be the leader, and the alliance was quite effective against the threat of Persian hegemony.[9] But it gradually became less a collective security coalition than a vehicle of Athenian domination. When member states attempted to dissolve their ties to the League, Athens responded with brutal force. Many allies were eventually forbidden to have fortifications, because walls would neutralize the power of the Athenian fleet and make it possible for recalcitrant members to withstand a siege. The League's treasury, originally on the island of Delos, was moved to Athens in 453. The move made the treasury safe from Persian attack but also, of course, gave Athens complete control of the League's finances.

Certainly, some of the Greek allies found Athenian democracy attractive or considered Athenian power necessary to peace and stability. Some recognized

the fairness of Athens' judicial system and the economic advantages of a single monetary standard, and some found tribute a small price for Athenian protection. But for others, "the carrying of the tribute and first fruits to Athens each spring, the forced appearances before a foreign court, the prohibition against coining silver, and the presence of Athenian garrisons and overseers were all signs of their loss of freedom and autonomy."[10] Thucydides, for one, spoke out against Athens' "insolence" and "tyranny," to no avail.[11] In the words of a modern historian, the Athenians "did not doubt that [they] had earned the right to rule both Greeks and barbarians."[12] In consequence of this arrogance, Athens constantly faced the threat of the defection of allies.

Pericles might have made amends by reducing the tribute, but his own populace was demanding expenditures (on the fleet, public buildings and works, pensions, etc.) that the tributes supported.[13] He might have reduced the size of the fleet to make both friends and enemies more comfortable, but he did not want to suggest to the allies that Athens might modify its commitment to the existing order and thereby encourage its disintegration. In sum, Athens' allies were not only a source of strength but also an Achilles' heel: as things developed, Athens needed them to fill its treasury and complement its army and navy, but the allies did not necessarily need Athens—at least they did not see things that way.[14] Their stake in the international order was considerably less than that of Athens. Thus the city had not only to fight the enemy but to keep many of its own allies in line by force. As long as Athens could do both, it would survive; but any misstep that might seriously, even if temporarily, damage the fleet or the army would invite the allies to break away, leaving Athens alone and vulnerable.[15] Indeed, this was to be the consequence of the Sicilian expedition during the Peloponnesian War, fought intermittently from 431 until 404 against a Spartan-led alliance.

Overextension at Syracuse. The policy of Pericles as that long conflict began was one of patience and consolidation. He stressed Athens' advantage in seapower and chose not to engage the enemy in pitched land battles. "We must not, through anger at losing land and home, join battle with the greatly superior forces of the Peloponnesians."[16] Pericles knew too that an Athenian defeat would encourage allies to defect, with Athens powerless to stop them;[17] the risk was too great. Neither would Pericles support daring exploits far from home that might siphon off forces necessary for defense while increasing commitments and vulnerabilities elsewhere.[18]

His strategy, then, was to exhaust the enemy. Let them strike, even at Attica, and let them expend their resources, manpower, and enthusiasm; Athens would maintain its empire, treasury, tributes, and trade, attacking the Peloponnesian allies by sea. When the Spartan army, predictably, came at harvest time to lay

waste to the Athenian hinterland, it would find the residents gone and no army to meet it; but the enemy would see, from time to time, his own countryside ravaged and ports damaged. Eventually he would tire of the war and its costs, and seek peace.[19]

The strategy worked, but Pericles himself could not see it through; he died in 429. It was left to the politician and general Nicias to counsel prudence and cement the temporary peace of 421, which bears his name. Yet when the opportunity arose to launch a daring attack on Syracuse, the volatile and ambitious leader Alcibiades persuaded the Athenians to support it, over the protestations of Nicias. The expedition, which sailed in 415, required an enormous commitment of money, ships, and men, but it promised, if all went well, to secure a major source of grain supplies and deny the same to the Peloponnesians.

All did not go well. Arguments among the leaders of the expedition, which included both Nicias and Alcibiades, gave the Syracusans ample warning. Alcibiades himself defected to the Spartans and convinced them to support a Corinthian force then sailing to raise the siege. The Syracusans did not surrender, and when Nicias, on the point of withdrawal in September 413, delayed his departure, Syracusan cavalry destroyed his force. Thucydides comments that the battle was "the greatest action we know of in Hellenic history—to the victors the most brilliant of successes, to the vanquished the most calamitous of defeats; for they were utterly and entirely defeated; their sufferings were on an enormous scale; their losses were, as they say, total; army, navy, everything was destroyed and out of many, only few returned."[20]

Having violated the peace, Athens had suffered the worst. The delicate equilibrium of its empire was irreparably damaged. Allies rebelled and defected and, as Pericles had said, Athens was helpless to prevent them. Sparta renewed the offensive, and victory over the Spartans would be impossible.

The Weakness of Ground Forces, and Persian Intervention. If it had maintained a better army, Athens may well have been able to prosecute a more aggressive war against Sparta from 431 to 421, avert the disaster in Sicily, and survive its aftermath. But the Athenian army in fact was poorly disciplined, and morale was often low; Xenophon says the Athenians took no pride in it.[21] It consisted primarily of heavily armored men. Athenian leaders did not understand the value of light-armed forces or of cavalry, and hence both were used ineffectively.[22]

On the other hand, Athenian statesmen believed that no other city-state would ever, could ever, match Athens' naval prowess. Pericles himself discounted the notion that Sparta could rival Athens at sea: "We have nothing to fear from their navy. . . . They are farmers, not sailors. . . . Seamanship is an art. It is not something that can be picked up and studied in one's spare time; indeed,

it allows one no spare time for anything else."[23] Persia, however, decided to subsidize the building of a Spartan navy, perhaps because Athens had been supporting two Persian satraps who were in rebellion. Money flowed into Sparta, and though naval success did not come immediately to the Peloponnesians, the balance at sea swung their way. The Spartans eventually destroyed the Athenian navy at the battle of Aegospotami in 405, and thereupon from land and sea laid siege to Athens itself. The city surrendered in the spring of 404 B.C.

Thus when the end of Athenian hegemony came, it was not solely or even primarily the result of pervasive trends that sapped the city's strength. Nor would it be accurate to say that the Peloponnesian War was the result of a transformation in the ancient equivalent of a world order. The war produced the decline of Athens and a new order, not vice versa. The conflict was an intolerable strain, and the strategic—in some cases, even tactical—mistakes committed by the Athenians brought disaster. Unless one holds that the Fates rule human existence, one must see the city-state's downfall as an outcome, a consequence, of many factors, including strategic folly. Many of Athens' mistakes would be repeated by the Venetian Republic.

The Most Serene Republic of Venice

It is tempting to explain the decline of Venice with sweeping generalizations about trends and influences beyond the Republic's control. There was, for example, the discovery in 1492 of the New World, which suddenly gave new latitude to the aspirations and capacities of Spain and Portugal, England, France, and the Netherlands. There was also the steady erosion, as other countries modernized and capitalized upon opportunities, of Venice's structural advantages in industry, trade, and finance. William McNeill explains, "As northwestern Europe developed—and it did so rapidly—skills and resources that once had to be imported from the east and the south could be supplied locally. In proportion as this happened, Italian capitalists, artisans, and shippers were liable to lose their strategic advantage."[24] But the decline of Venice cannot be fully grasped without tracing a succession of strategical failures in the fifteenth century that removed Venice from the front rank of European powers. Four errors contributed much to its decline: exhausting mainland wars and concomitant inattention to the Eastern threat, a lack of useful allies, poor generalship, and an inadequate army.

The Mainland Wars. Until Francesco Foscare was elected doge in 1423, Venetian foreign policy had aimed at keeping peace with even the most hostile of the mainland despots. Foscare changed this approach and with it the direction of Venetian history. His predecessor had described the new doge as "vapid and

light-headed, snatching at everything and achieving little"—a characterization that turned out to be prophetic.[25]

A year after Foscare was invested, Venice went to war against Milan. It was perhaps "the most ambitious war on which Venice had ever embarked," yet the results were most disappointing.[26] After seven years of fighting the Venetians had won no victories of lasting importance, had spent millions of ducats to support their field army, and still had failed to curb the Milanese appetite for intrigue and battle.

The Republic did indeed gain territory on the *terra firma* surrounding its 118 islands in the Lagoon of Venice, but the cost of obtaining and protecting these new lands proved a crippling burden. Fighting continued sporadically for twenty-five years, with no further conquests, while the treasury continued to dwindle. Venice could neither come to acceptable terms with Milan nor win a decisive victory. Peace was not made until 1455. By that time, however, the strategic equation had been fundamentally changed, by the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans two years before.

The Byzantine Empire had been moribund for centuries, and its fall was no surprise. The Venetians, however, had been too absorbed by the fighting in Italy to consider plans for the defense of their Aegean empire, which was now threatened. Also, they had been too complacent after their acquisition of Greek and Balkan coastal cities (which had begged for Venetian protection as the Ottomans advanced into Europe) to foresee that these gains would soon be for nothing; most of the Balkan Peninsula would be in Turkish hands by 1463. Venice, in fact, could now do little to recoup its prior strategic control of the northern Aegean and, effectively, of Constantinople.

Venice Stands Alone. Even if the city had wanted to respond to the Turkish savagery against Venetian merchant seamen caught in the siege of Constantinople, or to reinforce its posts in the Aegean Sea, it was in no position to do so. After thirty years of fighting in Italy, money and manpower were both in short supply. Foscare's successor, Pasquale Malipiero, attempted to keep peace with the Ottomans even as he sought allies to help retake Constantinople, but no firm support was forthcoming from any Western power. Malipiero decided to bide his time; business continued as usual until his death in 1462.

The new doge, Christoforo Moro, reversed course and, with the Great Council, impetuously approved an alliance with Pope Pius II, the Duke of Burgundy, and the King of Hungary. These allies were worth little; Burgundy did not deliver the money or the troops promised, the pope's coffers were nearly empty, and the Hungarian army, hundreds of miles to the north of the Aegean, was already exhausted by campaigning against the Turks. Venice was alone. Just as the Venetians had earlier reversed their policy of cautious detachment from

mainland wars, entangling themselves in an endless war with Milan, they now discarded allied action against the Ottomans and continued by themselves. To take on the Turks was difficult enough; to do so without allies was nearly hopeless; and to enter this contest after decades of mainland war was fateful indeed.

Several years went by without either a significant victory or a significant defeat for the Turks or the Venetians. Finally, however, the Ottoman sultan decided to concentrate on expansion in the Aegean Sea. He set his sights on the large island of Negroponte (Euboea), the Venetian stronghold near Athens, and in 1470 seized it in a campaign lasting just four weeks.

Poor Decisions and Inferior Numbers. The Turks might have been held at bay had the Venetian commander, a career diplomat, been less timid. He was one of a succession of poor generals hired by the Venetians. (His dismal performance was overshadowed only by that of Francesco Bussone, who, after leading the Venetian armies against Milan for seven years, had been tried and executed in 1431 for treason.) However, on the ground the Venetians were simply no match for the Ottomans, who could muster tens of thousands of well trained soldiers for coordinated attacks on the Aegean coasts by sea and land. While Venice could overmatch anyone at sea, it could not face the Sultan by land. Problems of logistics, corruption, and personal feuding went unsolved; experienced soldiers were in short supply after thirty years of fighting; and the new recruits were "a heterogenous collection of Italian mercenaries," hired only for short periods.[27] In addition, the Venetian army was distracted by a dispute with Austria that led to an assault on Trieste. The Venetian Senate would not send troops farther east, with the result that throughout the war its Aegean forces were inferior in number to the Turks.[28] The troops that did go to the Aegean did so by sea, travelling a thousand miles, facing northerly winds as well as eighty thousand Turks—who had the wind at their backs and were easily resupplied.

After Negroponte fell, Venice carried on the fruitless war for another nine years before the Great Council reluctantly agreed to settle for peace. Venice, though relatively prosperous at the outset, had by 1479 unwisely spent its treasure and strength and had thus lost its place in the front ranks of power. Its wars, however, had not been inevitable; Venetian decline was not some long, fated process merely punctuated by a final struggle. Rather, specific errors in politico-military strategy directly contributed to its loss of stature.

Edwardian Britain: Hollow Victory

Much has been written suggesting that Britain's weakened position in the twentieth century was the result of macro-economic trends traceable from the

mid–nineteenth century, or that it was the product of such developments, far beyond Britain's borders and control, as the rise of the United States, Japan, and the Soviet Union.[29] But an argument can be made that Britain's decline was the immediate and direct result of a war that was both avoidable and badly prosecuted.

Among Britain's strategical mistakes in the Great War of 1914–1918, four are prominent: lack of an explicit and convincing commitment to France; failure to construct and deploy a larger and more concentrated army, because of an overestimation of the effectiveness of blockade; continuance of the war even after its horrible dimensions had become clear; and the weakness of the peace settlement that followed. Even recognizing that many economic and political trends were largely beyond the control of the British government, one can agree that the unbearable burden of the war was the immediate cause of Britain's decline and that the nation's strategic decisions affected its outbreak, nature, and course.

Commitment to France, and Army Reform. The German concept for a two–front war against France and Russia rested on two crucial assumptions that proved to be false. The stewards of the famed Schlieffen Plan postulated, first, that Britain would intervene neither to save Belgium from occupation nor France from defeat, and second that if Britain did intervene, it could not do so quickly enough or with enough force to frustrate the intended German advance. Berlin was wrong on both counts, but it had been led to these errors by British policy.[30]

For many years, British statesmen had contemplated an explicit alliance with France and, accordingly, had advocated both army reform and contingency plans to send troops quickly and in substantial numbers to the continent. A 1905 memorandum outlined what was needed: "An efficient army of 120,000 British Troops might just have the effect of preventing any important German successes on the Franco-German frontier. . . . That would almost certainly bring about a speedy, and from the British and French points of view, a satisfactory peace."[31]

Yet public sentiment and bureaucratic infighting prevented any such formal alliance or any open commitment to send troops abroad, however necessary military planners thought at least the latter to be. The policy implications of an expeditionary force were attacked on every side. The radicals in the ruling Liberal party would not hear of it and would probably have split the party over the issue. A coalition of "navalists" had no inclination whatsoever to contemplate any but a "blue water" strategy.[32] Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey had, as a result, the awkward task of deterring Germany without explicitly committing Britain to the defense of France. When the Cabinet learned of military consultation between the British and French general staffs, Grey was forced to write to the French ambassador that "consultation between [military] experts is not,

and ought not to be, regarded as an engagement that commits either Govern-
ment to action in a contingency that has not arisen and may never arise."[33]

In the area of army reform there was more progress, and a professional
expeditionary force eighty thousand strong was created. Nonetheless, in 1914
the German naval attaché in London could write that "the weight of England's
land forces is inconsiderable. . . . Besides this it must be held to be very doubtful
whether England would transfer her expeditionary force to the Continent."[34]
The estimate was not far off the mark. Even as the Schlieffen Plan was set into
motion in the first days of August, Whitehall still debated what to do with the
British Expeditionary Force, the BEF. The French ambassador begged, British
commanders pleaded and fumed, but in the end perhaps only the lack of an
alternative plan got the BEF on its way to France.[35] Two months later it was
sacrificed in a heroic attempt to turn the German right flank and thereby prevent
the enemy from turning the French left and reaching the Channel ports. Had
Germany won this first battle of Ypres, the Western Front would have crumbled.
As it was, the German army could advance no further and was obliged to
entrench.

The Navalists, a Long War, and a Weak Peace. In part, Britain's confusion over
whether and how to use the BEF stemmed from the long years of stubborn
resistance by the navalists to any new approaches. The Admiralty wanted no part
of fighting on the continent, believing rather in the ultimate effectiveness of
naval blockade and engagements on the high seas; in its view, the best way to
counteract Germany was simply to build more ships.[36] Captain Herbert Rich-
mond, a theorist not in sympathy with the Admiralty's Mahanian convictions,
could not fathom its lack of vision: "The Admiralty plans are to my mind the
vaguest amateur stuff I have ever seen. I cannot conceive how they were
discussed or what ideas governed the framers of them."[37] Many both within the
Admiralty and outside it were bent on comparing strengths by counting
dreadnoughts, while those who advocated blockades as a primary means of naval
action overestimated their efficacy. The arguments of both always emphasized
naval over army spending and capital ships over minelayers, minesweepers,
torpedo boats or torpedo boat destroyers, and showed little concern for antisub-
marine warfare or tactical doctrine.[38]

The idea that seapower could counterbalance German strength on land or
determine the outcome of the war proved false. In the event, blockade had an
effect but did not, alone, bring Germany to its knees, much less force a quick
end to the fighting. The German navy refused battle, the Triple Alliance found
foodstuffs and raw materials in Eastern Europe, Germany continued to trade
overland with neutral countries and, with its strong chemical industry, syn-
thesized many blockaded goods. The starvation that occurred near the end of

the war was due more to the ruination of German agriculture than to the blockade. Grey later recalled that "we did not sufficiently concentrate attention on the one cardinal point: that it was the German army which had to be beaten, and that this could be done only on the Western front.... Had this been grasped continuously as the central fact of the war, the side shows—Gallipoli, Baghdad, Salonika—would either never have been undertaken or would have been kept within smaller dimensions."[39]

The cost of this miscalculation was not measured in human casualties alone—three-quarters of a million British soldiers killed, twice as many maimed. The very length and intensity of a war that might have been avoided or shortened denuded Britain of hard-earned advantages; waging total war on Germany for four years exacted an enormous price. It forever disrupted British trade, brought rampant inflation, and exhausted national savings; huge loans were incurred; and 40 percent of the merchant fleet was lost. Widespread unemployment, heavy taxation, and economic dislocation followed the war.[40] Britain could not fight that war *and* maintain its previous advantages in international politics afterwards, unless by the forbearance and anemia of others. These were not to last much more than a decade.

If the costs of the First World War proved burdensome, it was well understood at the time that a second would be intolerable. Yet Britain was unable to construct a stable and peaceful international order following the great struggle of 1914–1918. Instead, however good their intentions, British leaders contributed to a situation that some twenty years later required the country to make all the same sacrifices, from a position much weaker than it had occupied before the first terrible conflict. Perhaps the only benefit of the interwar years with respect to lasting peace was an example of failure that would be vivid in the minds of those responsible for ending the Second World War.

Learning from Comparative Strategy

Comparing the United States to Athens, Venice, and Britain can, if not illuminate specific American strategic strengths or missteps, at least offer a reasonable basis for evaluating its grand strategy. The United States has not suffered the precipitous decline of other great powers; it has, consciously or unconsciously, repeated some and avoided others of the strategic choices of other great, democratic, commercial, and maritime powers. What can be learned?

The Role of War. The most obvious difference between the experience of the United States and those of the great powers examined above is that the United States has not engaged in a prolonged and intense conflict of the kind that was, in other cases, the immediate cause of decline. But from here we must go in one

of two directions. There are those who argue that the United States has in fact
suffered some degree of decline and that faulty post-war leadership accounts for
that decline. Alternatively, there are those who contend that U.S. politico-
military strategy since the Second World War, when the United States matured
as a great power, has been essentially successful and that the elements of that
success can be identified.

In the first instance, those who maintain that the United States has in fact
declined are likely to name as the primary cause of that decline either the Cold
War *in toto* or one of its derivative wars, Vietnam. The Cold War, they argue,
was itself a costly conflict, whether fought openly on the geographical margins
of the superpowers or vicariously at home—through huge expenditures on both
nuclear and conventional arms, aid programs, diplomacy, and clandestine
operations. They assert as well that Cold War policies facilitated the rise of
Germany and Japan as economic superpowers and undermined the American
economy through inflation and federal debt. But these views ultimately rest upon
the notion that war itself, albeit a Cold War, is the immediate and direct cause
of decline and the transformation of world order. If so, the study of great power
decline must still focus on politico-military strategy. Such has been the argument
here.

With respect to the contrary view that U.S. foreign policy in the postwar era
has been essentially successful, comparison between the United States and its
democratic, commercial, and maritime predecessors yields several supportive
observations. The most important is that the United States has in fact avoided a
prolonged and intense war—no small point. The Athenian dénouement was a
consequence of a prolonged struggle; Athenians believed they could outlast their
enemies, but because of their errors and the resulting disasters, it was they who
wearied first and were defeated. The Venetians too squandered their strength,
first on mainland wars that yielded little gain and then on a futile, belated attempt
to recover control of the Aegean. Britain entered a struggle for which it was not
prepared, and its hollow victory required the sacrifice of the empire. Not only
has the United States been spared such tragedies, but following World War II
it contributed largely to an international order that consciously avoided many
of the failures of its predecessors.

The Role of Allies. The second and most remarkable difference between the
strategic conduct of the United States and that of the case studies above is the
American cultivation of reliable allies. Following the Second World War, the
United States deliberately pursued the political and economic well-being of
friendly nations and former enemies, particularly in Europe. The strength,
commitment, and reliability of Nato members (and Japan) can reasonably be
considered an indispensable element of the successful deterrence of full-scale war

and breakdown in the international order. Despite occasional internal strains over disunity or disproportionate burdens, Nato has been a truly remarkable phenomenon; its success stands in sharp and flattering contrast to the Athenian and Venetian experiences.

Further, the members of that alliance have shared the fundamental interests of the United States. Many of Athens' allies in the Delian League did their part only under threat of violence or from the lack of a reasonable alternative. Athens controlled the League treasury, forbade many of its members to erect fortifications, and intervened in their internal affairs in order to enforce tributes. Venice's sometime allies professed the need to unite and defend Christendom against the infidel but were much more interested (Hungary aside, though it was of little help) in preserving or enhancing their power positions relative to their Christian brethren. Edwardian Britain, for its part, disdained the very notion of commitment to an ally; it too much enjoyed standing alone and playing the balancer. In contrast, the most important of the American allies have themselves been industrialized, secular, democratic states committed to the free exchange of goods and ideas and to warding off the claims and threats of illiberal ideologies. The United States, unlike its predecessors, has not only been able to rely upon allies in its defense but has found in these allies partners deeply committed to the international order.

The Difficulty of Democracy. The effects of democratic practices on politico-military strategy offer another revealing comparison between the United States and other great maritime powers of history. The American system of government is a good deal more fragmented than those of Athens, Venice, or Britain; a commonplace holds that it tends to subordinate grand strategy to more immediate and provincial political goals.

In open political systems, where interests are freely articulated and interested citizens agitate the processes of government, the status quo has so many "children" that change is made difficult.[41] Pericles' discretion was narrowed by inflexible demands on public spending that, in turn, depended a great deal on tribute from allies. Athens had constantly to demonstrate its resolve to enforce these payments, with the result that the allies became increasingly disenchanted with its domination. In turn, Athens' military requirements reinforced vested interests in high public spending, beginning the cycle anew. In Venice it was an elite class of landowners, not the merchants or guildsmen, who pushed the government to engage in fruitless wars for more territories on the *terra firma* of northern Italy, eventually draining material and human resources from the more important and longer-range goal of maintaining the eastern empire and its lucrative trade. In Britain the discretion of the Liberal cabinet was narrowed by

the popular attachment to splendid isolation, the industrialists' financial interest in the "blue water" strategy, and by public outcry for social expenditures.

American political leaders are familiar with such pressures. It is clear that an enormous task lies before the grand-strategy makers of the United States—a task at least as difficult as Britain's following its victory in the First World War. A new American politico-military strategy for the post–Cold War era will be difficult to conceive and difficult to carry out. Analysts of foreign policy have already begun to note that failure here may doom the United States, like Britain before, to repeat its sacrifices in a second confrontation in years to come.

I f the strategic comparisons made here have value, it is that in categorizing the great powers by appropriate characteristics, similarity among causes becomes clearer. Such comparisons, however, should restrict themselves to the realm of grand strategy, not indulging the temptation to address tactics, doctrine, logistics, technologies, economic statistics, or social trends. Categorizing great powers is a method of discovering cause and effect in national politico-military strategy making, an approach that may in addition provide grounds for more detailed policy prescription. Understanding that neither decline nor catastrophic wars are inevitable and that national leaders have important choices to make, analysts of decline can better address present-day concerns.

The case studies above suggest that war contributes a great deal to the decline of great powers but that leaders by their strategic decisions affect fundamentally the nature and course of conflicts. In each of the cases, political leaders made choices with identifiable and important consequences. Neither the outbreak of the transforming wars nor the manner in which they were waged seems to have been inevitable. None of these great powers was absolutely obliged to go to war, or to do so when it did; each also chose how to fight its transforming (and fatal) conflict.

These parallels bring to light as well the crucial role of allies. Athenian allies participated under duress and were therefore less valuable than they might have been; the Venetian allies were too few, too fickle, or too weary to contribute much; and turn-of-the-century Britain disdained commitments to would-be allies. In each instance of decline examined here, the land forces of the great maritime power involved were poorly placed, inadequate to the task, or both. The Athenian army was simply mediocre, while the Venetian was mercenary, weary, and unable to concentrate its strength. The British Expeditionary Force was superb, but its plans were hampered by bureaucratic rivals, and its prospective commitment failed to deter the probable opponent from attacking Belgium and France.

In each case too, the complex influences of democratic governance on the making of strategy became apparent. National leaders attempt, with whatever success, to reconcile vested interests, public opinion, and their own political needs with the requirements of foreign policy. Some are able to solve this difficult equation and act prudently, some are not. Yet however constrained strategy makers may be by domestic or external circumstances, the choices they make do greatly influence their country's destiny.

Notes

1. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981).

2. Kennedy, passim. In fairness, Professor Kennedy was not in agreement with many of the interpretations of his book that his critics argued against. See, e.g., his response to Walt Rostow in *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1988, pp. 1108–11, and note 6 below.

3. Kennedy, pp. xv–xxiv.

4. Gilpin, p. 210.

5. Ibid., pp. 209–10.

6. Walt Rostow criticized Kennedy's work for false analogies between the United States and fundamentally dissimilar great powers, contending that the United States was in fact distinct from the other great powers (except Britain) examined by Kennedy in that it has never been the hegemonic power that Kennedy represented. See W.W. Rostow, "Beware of Historians Bearing False Analogies," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1988, pp. 863–8. Other reviewers also found the United States dissimilar to the other cases presented in the book; see, *inter alia*, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Before the Fall," *New Republic*, 13 February 1989, pp. 37–9, and Samuel Huntington, "The U.S.: Decline or Renewal?" *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1988–1989, pp. 76–96.

7. Kennedy, pp. xxi–xxii. (Emphasis original.)

8. Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969), p. 189.

9. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, I.96–7 and III.10–1 (citing chapter, verse); and J.O.A. Larsen, "The Constitution and the Original Purpose of the Delian League," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philosophy*, vol. 51 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1940).

10. D.W. Bradeen, "The Popularity of the Athenian Empire," *Historia*, vol. 9 (1960), p. 257; and see T.J. Quinn, "Thucydides and the Unpopularity of the Athenian Empire," *Historia*, vol. 13, 1964, p. 266.

11. Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, xii.2.

12. William Scott Ferguson, *Greek Imperialism* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1913).

13. See G.B. Grundy, *Thucydides and the History of His Age*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1948), pp. 141–4. Grundy claimed (pp. 176–7) that "out of the proceeds of the tribute and taxes . . . more than 20,000 persons were maintained" by the state.

14. Quinn (p. 266) concludes that even the allies' commoners, whose political participation was, in effect, guaranteed by Athens, would just as soon have been "rid of Athens provided that a break with her did not involve injury to themselves."

15. See Thucydides, I.75 and I.140.

16. Ibid., I.144.

17. In Thucydides' account, Pericles asserts baldly that "if we suffered defeat, we should at the same time lose our allies, on whom our strength depends, since they will immediately revolt if we are left with insufficient troops to send against them." Ibid.

18. "You should feel confident in ultimate victory, if only you will make up your minds not to add to the empire while the war is in progress, and not to go out of your way to involve yourselves in new perils." Ibid.

19. For an excellent treatment of Periclean strategy, see Hans Delbruck, *Die Strategies des Perikles* (Berlin: Reimer, 1890).

20. Thucydides, VII.87. For a detailed account see Donald Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 159–353.

21. Xenophon, *Government of Athens*, II.1. That the Athenians had bogged down in the Egyptian campaign in 456 was partly due to the limited number of soldiers committed to the assault and the total absence of siege

troops. That the Athenians could not restore Orestes, King of Thessaly, to his throne in 458 was because Thessalian cavalry prevented the Athenians from moving outside their fortified camps. On the other hand, when the Athenians successfully subdued the islands of Aegina and Samos, they did so with ground attacks and sieges, although these were accompanied by and seen as great maritime victories. Finally, in Sicily, the Athenians arrived without any cavalry at all, could not win without it, and, later, were themselves cut to pieces by Syracusan cavalry.

22. See Grundy, pp. 262–4 and 277. Thucydides mentions the effectiveness of cavalry many times: I.3; II.22, 31, 100; IV.44; V.73; VI.64; and VII.6. For more on the use of light-armed troops in the ancient Greek world (specifically about fifty years after these events), see Charles D. Hamilton, "From Archidamus to Alexander: The Revolution in Greek Warfare," *Naval War College Review*, Winter 1995, p. 96ff.

23. Thucydides, I.142.

24. William H. McNeill, *Venice: The Hinge of Europe* (Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 55–6.

25. John Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice* (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 299.

26. Ibid., p. 304.

27. M.E. Mallet and J.R. Hale, *The Military Organization of a Renaissance State* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), p. 47.

28. The population of Venice was about two hundred thousand, of which forty thousand were males fit for arms. Drawing on its mainland possessions and mercenaries, Venice could field an army of forty thousand in addition to a navy of thirty-six thousand men. Locally raised garrison troops around the Mediterranean and Aegean littorals added to these numbers, but they had to be supplemented by the regular Venetian army—which, as a result, was spread around the empire and, in individual battles, usually suffered accordingly from inferiority of numbers.

29. Paul Kennedy makes that case in three places: in *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (New York: Scribner, 1976); "The First World War and the International Power System," *International Security*, Summer 1984, pp. 7–40; and in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. See also Aaron Friedburg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline 1895–1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988); Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share* (New York: Longman, 1975); Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation* (New York: Scribner, 1969); Derek H. Aldcroft, *The Development of British Industry and Foreign Competition, 1875–1914* (Toronto, Ont.: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1968); and E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968).

30. Among those who have argued that a formal British commitment to defend France and Belgium would have altered German policy are Henry Kissinger, "Coalition Diplomacy in the Nuclear Age," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1964, pp. 525–45; and Pierre Renouvin, "Britain and the Continent: The Lessons of History," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1938, pp. 111–7.

31. Memo by General Sir Charles Callwell, member of the Directorate of Military Operations, "British Military Action in Case of War with Germany," 3 October 1905, quoted in Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), p. 50.

32. The various industrialists, shippers, naval officers, bureaucrats, and politicians who constituted the navalist faction generally believed that government spending should heavily favor the navy; and that a maritime strategy, relying almost exclusively on that navy, would be the most effective deterrent to war and, if necessary, the most efficient means of prosecuting a war. Radicals, a caucus of the Liberal Party, believed Britain's involvement in continental disputes and imperial rivalries would sooner or later enmesh the kingdom in a war abroad to the detriment of social reform and economic progress at home. "As so often before," writes historian Michael Howard, "radicals and navalists found themselves in a natural alliance against the spectres of militarism, continental strategy, and Balance of Power." Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972), p. 41.

33. Viscount Grey of Fallodon, quoting letter, Sir Edward Grey to M. Cambon, French Ambassador in London, *Twenty-Five Years, 1892–1916*, vol. 1 (London: Frederick A. Stockes, 1925), p. 97.

34. Report by Captain von Muller, in London, 19 February 1914, *German Diplomatic Documents 1871–1914*, vol. 4 (London: Methuen, 1931), pp. 324–7.

35. See Grey, vol. 2, pp. 1–18 and 62ff; and Williamson, pp. 346–61.

36. Navalism found many sympathizers in high places who had a pecuniary or practical political interest in naval armaments and related industries, a phenomenon well described by Phillip Noel-Baker, *The Private Manufacture of Armaments*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936). Arthur Marder speaks of this insistence on naval armaments and a "blue water" strategy as "the steady pressure of a vested interest and a state of mind"; see his *The Anatomy of British Sea Power* (New York: Octagon Books, 1940, reprinted 1976), p. 27.

37. Arthur Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952), pp. 48–9. Richmond's outspokenness eventually earned him an early retirement.

38. Arthur Marder, "The Influence of History on Sea Power: The Royal Navy and the Lessons of 1914–1918," *Pacific Historical Review*, November 1972, pp. 418ff.; and H.W. Richmond, *National Policy and National Strength and Other Essays* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1928).

39. Grey, vol. 2, p. 73.

40. On the costs of the war see A.S. Milward, *The Economic Effects of the World Wars on Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1970); Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (New York: Morrow, 1972), pp. 423–8; Mathias, pp. 431–7; and David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Longman, 1991), pp. 105–11.

41. This is not to say that bureaucracies and other organizations in closed political systems or authoritarian societies do not have vested interests that they seek to protect against threatened change.

――――――――― Ψ ―――――――――

Also by this issue's cover artist:

Marshall, Ian. *Ironclads and Paddlers*. Charlottesville, Va.: Howell Press, 1993. 108pp.

This is the second book written and illustrated by Ian Marshall, a distinguished maritime artist and scholar now residing in Maine. His first, *Armored Ships*, was published in 1991; the present work, as suggested by John Maxtone-Graham (himself a maritime author) in his foreword, is a "retroactive sequel," concentrating on the developments in metal construction and steam propulsion that eventually produced the propeller-driven battleship types of the earlier book. Mr. Marshall's text not only traces the development of the ships themselves but looks at certain closely related subjects: the operational concept of *guerre de course*; the personalities of Thomas, Lord Cochrane (an apparent model for Patrick O'Brian's Jack Aubrey) and of Jackie Fisher; and two "island fortresses," Bermuda and Malta (to which the need for coaling stations gave new importance). Learned, informative, and enjoyable as is Mr. Marshall's writing, his art is even better: the thirty-eight watercolor plates (which, as is his style, portray ships with exacting precision in settings authentically associated with them) and his many pencil sketches are stunning.