

THE  
WESTERN WAY  
OF WAR

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*Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN KEEGAN

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ble anguish in modern infantry campaigns: combatants during a year of active duty are constantly exposed to unpredictable fire from both soldier and civilian of any sex and age, even when enemy infantry are nowhere to be seen. However, battle was frightening for the Greeks precisely because killing was *not* random. Fighting without artillery barrages, the surprises of a jungle or urban ambush, or the anonymous bullet from a distant sniper, the Greeks could know that in battle, after all, very little is left to chance. They knew with certainty the sequence of events on the horizon: charge, collision, hand to hand, push, trampling, and rout. Also, there was a primitive animality in the use of edged weapons by men in armor, especially when, unlike in later times, the javelin thrower, archer, slinger, and their accompanying missile weapons were kept out of the bloodletting. A physical and psychological exertion of energy was required by men who killed with hand tools and then watched one another struggle, bleed, and go down beneath their feet. And because the casualties of such fighting were generally predictable and unchanging—10 to 20 percent among the defeated, 5 percent or less for the victors—battle became increasingly and more predictably terrifying as a man aged and went out again and again on these awesome missions. It was a course of events that was an inescapable part of his very life: in a sense, for the hoplite, battle was more of a death verdict rather than the indeterminate sentence of recent conflict. Now a tour of duty comprises both a beginning and an end to the exposure of death.

The notification of intent—at once a revolutionary and frightening precedent on the part of the Greeks, which has survived in the modern Western military mind—also explains the horror: once the respective phalanxes lumbered forth, all the men were sure exactly of what would soon occur, and knew that both victory and also defeat were the sole responsibilities of the men at their side. There was no solace in the hope of reinforcement from reserves or from a relief battalion. Preliminary aerial bombardment of the enemy and artillery “softening-up” were likewise unknown. The Greek soldier also even lacked the confi-

dence that derives from knowing one may have an overwhelming numerical superiority or firepower or will fight with original tactics and superior generalship. Success or defeat depended only on the fighters' ability to stand upright in bronze armor for the next hour or so, resisting the temptation to fall back or even to shy away from the lance head at his face and groin. Nor was the manner of death unexpected, unimagined, or unknown: men knew precisely how they would die in battle—driven through by spear or sword, crushed by shield and foot, right in the midst of family and friends.

### *The End of the Greek Legacy*

That the heritage of Greek hoplite battle now lives on in the West is especially surprising when the mechanics of pitched infantry battle, despite advances in technology, are now nearly obsolete, and with them the very tenets of the doctrine that justified them: notification of intent, mutual acknowledgment of the upcoming collision of forces, and obedience to the decision of the battlefield dead. There is a terrible danger in the nuclear age to all of us who see this very legacy of the Greek manner of warfare surviving and living on well past the demise of actual infantry battle and the moral climate of its birth, a climate with which it was once so uniquely designed and integrated. Clearly, we are no longer an agrarian society of independent small landowners. We have inherited only the idea of Greek battle as a heroic notion, we have detached it from the real fighting, and we have ignored its real lessons, transferring the Greeks' way of thinking to an entirely different—and dangerous—set of circumstances and a foreign theater of operations.

For example, we must not delude ourselves into thinking that an exchange of even tactical nuclear weapons is somehow justified because, like the Greeks, we finally have no recourse other than to notify the enemy of our intent, to signal both the time and manner of our attack, to array our forces upon the “battle-

field," and then to advance—as if the acknowledgment of direct conflict, openly giving and receiving blows without guile, might somehow justify the enormity of the collision. Unlike the Greeks, we could not possibly abide by the decision of any such "battle," exchange the dead, content in the knowledge that in meeting and facing down the enemy we had minimized, rather than increased, the killing. The daylight collision of armed soldiers was originally for the Greeks a grim resolution to have the fighting done quickly and effectively with a minimum of fatalities, not a romantic stage to showcase brave resolve. But any nuclear conflict would of course be final and induce the end of civilization as we have known it. It is fearsome to think that Americans (who alone have employed the nuclear bomb in wartime use) could claim a heroic purpose in such a scenario. How can there be satisfaction on our part if we have led ourselves to our final slaughter?

Have we not seen then, in our lifetime, the end to the Western way of war?

## Abbreviations of Ancient Authors and Their Works Used in This Book

Ael.	Aelian	Pol.	Politica
Tact.	Tactics	Arr.	Arrian
VH	Varia Historia	Anab.	Anabasis
Aesch.	Aeschylus	Tact.	Tactica
Ag.	Agamemnon	Ath.	Athenaeus
Cho.	Choephoroi	Dem.	Demosthenes
Eum.	Eumenides	Diod.	Diodorus Siculus
Pers.	Persae	Eup.	Eupolis
PV	Prometheus Vincit	Eur.	Euripides
Sept.	Septem contra Thebas	Bacch.	Bacchae
Supp.	Supplices	HF	Hercules Furens
Alk.	Alkaios	Phoen.	Phoenissae
Amm.	Ammianus Marcellinus	Frontin.	Frontinus
Marc.	Ammianus Marcellinus	Str.	Strategemata
Anac.	Anacreon	Hdt.	Herodotus
Andoc.	Andocides	Hell. Oxy.	Hellenica Oxyrhynchia
App.	Appian	Hom.	Homer
BCiv.	Bella Civilia	Il.	Iliad
Archil.	Archilochos	Od.	Odyssey
Ar.	Aristophanes	IG	Inscriptiones Graecae, 1873-
Ach.	Achaemians	Isae.	Isaeus
Av.	Aves	Just.	Justinus, Epitome
Eccl.	Ecclesiasticus	Luc.	Lucan
Eq.	Equites	Lycurg.	Lycurgus
Lys.	Lysistrata	Leoc.	Leocrates
Nub.	Nubes	Lys.	Lysias
Plut.	Plutus	Men.	Menander
Ran.	Ranae	Asp.	Aspis
Thesm.	Thesmophoriazusae	Nep.	Nepos
Vesp.	Vespae	Att.	Atticus
Arist.	Aristotle	Epam.	Epaminondas
Ath. Pol.	Athenaion Politia	Paus.	Pausanias